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Christopher Prendergast, ed. *A Modern History of French Literature. From the Sixteenth Century to the Twentieth Century*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017. 725 pp. \$49.95 (hb) ISBN 9780691157726.

Review by John D. Lyons, University of Virginia.

Christopher Prendergast should be congratulated for putting together this fine new overview of French literature from the Renaissance to the present. Such a volume is difficult to conceive and to execute. It is also difficult to review, insofar as the persons typically asked to comment (such as myself) are quite clearly not within the audience of non-specialist readers to whom the chapters are addressed. Specialists, teachers of French literature, will be tempted to look for lacunae, scrutinizing the table of contents for what was left out, however minor an author or text, or to quibble about the specific work by which an author is represented (should Hugo be remembered as the author of *Hernani*, rather than of *Les Contemplations*?). Judged, however, as starting points or as *points de repère*—landmarks, as Prendergast says—for the reader setting out on an exploration of this literary heritage or seeking to deepen her or his knowledge of a specific period or genre, *A History of Modern French Literature* seems to me to be an excellent choice. Most of all, Prendergast clearly made the right choice to invite contributors to write concentrated, focused, original essays rather than to make inventory-like overviews filled with dates and titles.

The volume opens with not one but two introductions, one by the editor and another by David Coward. In the first, Prendergast sets forth quite lucidly the scope and its rationale, the type of essays included, and the intended public, the “general reader.” Yet beyond the function of explaining the constitution and aims of the volume, this opening essay strikes me as being an excellent, readable essay on what “French literature” is and what are its main traits. The second introduction, David Coward’s “The Frenchness of French Literature” presents an overview of institutional practices that give shape to literature in France, the most important for the first few centuries treated in the volume being the Catholic Church and the centralized monarchy. Here we find a large amount of received knowledge, the sort of thing of which the general reader should certainly be aware, before more focused readings show the need to introduce nuance. Some of these initial presumptions lie outside the range of the following chapters; for instance, we learn that “there were no authors as such in the Middle Ages” (p. 25).

However, such introductory statements serve as excellent foils for the insights of many subsequent essays. The reader is, for instance, invited to begin with the idea that the seventeenth century was dominated by “a code of rigorous dogma” (p. 39); “*Le goût* was defined by *bienséance* (what is seemly) and by *vraisemblance* (what is true-seeming), both of which sanitized the most indecorous mythological subjects for the modern public” (p. 39). This is a view that is then quite reversed by Nicholas Paige in his luminous essay on Racine’s *Phèdre* later in the volume, where Paige points out that the real issue for seventeenth-century theorists—the practical aim of *vraisemblance*—was to “enhance the believability of the spectacle” (p. 199). This believability was the essential condition for the emotional turmoil that the audience would feel in empathizing with characters. As Paige writes, “From the vantage point of Racine’s audience, *Phèdre* acted as a host of the viewers’ identification by having passions they could share—quite literally” (p. 207). The

introductory presumption, presented by Coward (no doubt tongue-in-cheek), is that in the seventeenth century “readers demanded more emotion and more imagination, horrid words for classical theorists” (p. 40), whereas it becomes clear later that theorists such as Corneille and Longepierre (p. 200, and one could of course add, La Mesnardière and d’Aubignac) centered their theories of drama on the transmission of emotion to the audience.

Another example of the way the second introduction provides a bridge between the English-speaking reader’s vision of French culture and the more detailed insights offered later appears in the early comment, “Where the Anglo-Saxon tradition is drawn to empiricism, the French have an in-built taste for abstract thinking” (p. 22). Later we learn, from Timothy Hampton, how concrete Montaigne’s *Essays* are, based in the observation of daily life. Eric Méchoulan describes how the French “moralists” “investigated the common habits of human beings” (p. 231) and mentions Pascal’s use of the experimental method to prove the existence of the vacuum. Judith Stalnaker points out how Rousseau alludes to the highly empirical naturalist Buffon in his *Discours sur l’inégalité* (p. 395). In short, the volume is structured to move felicitously from generalization and preconception to unexpected insight.

Who are the contributors who have written this excellent new history? Given that this is a volume specifically intended for an English-language audience, it is not surprising that the writers are all either themselves anglophone or are teaching in British and American universities. So none of them teach in France; sixty per cent teach in North America, and the others in Britain. The demographics also trace a bell curve of generations. Half of the contributors published their first articles and books in the 1980s and 1990s, one quarter either in the 1970s or the first decade of the twenty-first century; almost ten percent entered the scholarly world in the 1960s. And one contributor published his first article in the second decade of this century.

As a historically-organized collection of essays, the contents fall roughly into divisions by centuries, with extremely even distribution of approximately six chapters per century up to the end of the twentieth century—the most recent author studied is Assia Djebar. In terms of literary categories, a bit under half of the volume is consecrated to narrative fiction, particularly to the novel. Lyric poetry comes next, with six essays—an admirable proportion given the difficulty, which Prendergast cogently describes in his introduction, of helping English-only readers understand what are the structures, issues, and beauties of such a strongly language-dependent genre. Drama and essay each receive attention in four chapters. This is a rather rough description, since some chapters, like Edwin Duval’s on Erasmian thought in early sixteenth-century writers and Jean-Michel Rabaté’s on Samuel Beckett, range across a number of genres.

In short, I have only praise for this useful volume, which I will surely recommend to my students in the coming years.

LIST OF ESSAYS

Christopher Prendergast, “Introduction (1): Aims, Methods, Stories”

David Coward, “Introduction (2): The Frenchness of French Literature”

Edwin M. Duval, “Erasmus and the ‘First Renaissance’ in France”

Raymond Geuss, “Rabelais and the Low Road to Modernity”

Wes Williams, “Marguerite de Navarre: Renaissance Woman”

Timothy J. Reiss, “Ronsard: Poet Laureate, Public Intellectual, Cultural Creator”

Hassan Melehy, "Du Bellay and *La deffence et illustration de la langue françoise*"

Timothy Hampton, "Montaigne: Philosophy before Philosophy"

Christopher Braider, "Molière, Theater, and Modernity"

Nicholas Paige, "Racine, *Phèdre*, and the French Classical Stage"

Katherine Ibbett, "Lafayette, *La Princesse de Clèves* and the Conversational Culture of Seventeenth-Century Fiction"

Eric Méchoulan, "From Moralists to Libertines"

Judith Sribnai, "Travel Narratives in the Seventeenth Century: La Fontaine and Cyrano de Bergerac"

Larry F. Norman, "The Quarrel of the Ancients and the Moderns"

Nicholas Cronk, "Voltaire's *Candide*: Lessons of Enlightenment and the Search for Truth"

Pierre Saint-Amand, "Disclosures of the Boudoir: The Novel in the Eighteenth Century"

Catriona Seth, "Women's Voices in Enlightenment France"

Susan Maslan, "Comedy in the Age of Reason"

Kate E. Tunstall, "Diderot, *Le neveu de Rameau*, and the Figure of the *Philosophe* in Eighteenth-Century Paris"

Joanna Stalnaker, "Rousseau's First Person"

Aleksandar Stević, "Realism, the Bildungsroman, and the Art of Self-Invention: Stendhal and Balzac"

Sarah Rocheville and Etienne Beaulieu, "Hugo and Romantic Drama: The (K)night of the Red"

Peter Brooks, "Flaubert and *Madame Bovary*"

Clive Scott, "Baudelaire, Verlaine, Rimbaud: Poetry, Consciousness, and Modernity"

Roger Pearson, "Mallarmé and Poetry: Stitching the Random"

Michael Lucey, "Becoming Proust in Time"

Steven Ungar, "Céline/Malraux: Politics and the Novel in the 1930s"

Mary Ann Caws, "Breton, Char, and Modern French Poetry"

Mary Gallagher, "Césaire: Poetry and Politics"

Christopher Prendergast, "Sartre's *La Nausée* and the Modern Novel"

Jean-Michel Rabaté, "Beckett's French Contexts"

Nicholas Harrison, "Djebar and the Birth of 'Francophone' Literature"

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