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Christopher Semk, *Playing the Martyr: Theater and Theology in Early Modern France*. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2017. xxiv + 173 pp. \$75 U.S. (hb). ISBN 978-1-61148-803-6.

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Nothing could have prepared Paris theater-goers for a series of tragedies concerning Christian martyrs that trended from the mid-1630s to the mid-1640s. Dramatists included the leading lights of the age, Pierre Corneille and Jean Rotrou, and these plays were commercially successful during perhaps the most significant decade in the development of French drama, totaling sixteen in all. This is surprising on a number of levels. First, martyr plays were a feature of provincial theater; the capital's playhouses generally dominated the rest of the nation's entertainment, not the other way around. Second, the plot of such productions is somewhat calcified. The hero or heroine has previously converted or converts to Christianity; they are found out or reveal themselves; they are executed and do not waver in the faith, sometimes inspiring the conversion of other characters. Finally, martyrs embody extremes of chastity, fortitude, and idealism, hardly a recipe for creating audience empathy. While the names and exact nature of the conversion experience, revelation, and execution may vary, the basic features are predictable if not invariable. Such elements do not point to exciting performances, as noted by Katherine Ibbett: "[t]he martyr's stolid worthiness, though admirable, has little theatrical charm once his or her teleological point of existence—a glorious death—has been sidelined. We must look away from the martyr to find the interest in this material."^[1] Instead of static and one-dimensional martyrs, audiences were treated to crises of conscience, saints who were surprisingly sensual, and provocative theological questions thrashed out on the stage. It is especially the latter aspect that is dealt with in Christopher Semk's thoughtful and compact study. In it, he argues that "the 1640s turn toward martyrological subjects was part of a much broader reflection on the relationship between theater and religion" (xvi) and refocuses our attention on this intersection as the key component to understanding and approaching the plays. This marks a departure from many critics who have primarily looked to performative and political considerations as factors accounting for the success of this subgenre (though Semk cautions that the plays are far too homogenous to be classified as a subgenre).^[2]

Writing in 1646, Antoine Godeau, a flirtatious *salonnier* who became a serious bishop, optimistically believed that religious topics could reinvigorate and regulate the stage. Eight years later, the prelate published a caustic anti-theatrical sonnet baldly stating that public performances could benefit only those of idolatrous mentalities. It is this sea-change that interests Semk and is an evolution that is important to all researchers working on the period because the issues are such significant ones: illusion and reality; religiosity and secularization; censorship and artistic freedom. While interpretations of Aristotle's *Poetics* dominated theoretical debates during the seventeenth century, religious works (let alone Christian ones) were not envisioned in the treatise. Martyrological theater was consequently a relatively open experimental vehicle for dramatists to forge and try out their ideas. Semk makes the case that Jean Chapelain unwittingly championed the secularization of literature in his promotion of "a movement toward fiction as an autonomous product of human imagination, free from the constraints of historical, scientific, or religious accuracy" (p. 21). Since hagiographical legends contained embellished, even spurious, episodes, Corneille could claim with authority that believers owed only a "croyance

pieuse” to such details, giving him the license to inject the account of the historical Polyeucte’s martyrdom with seven major fabrications; as Semk points out, this is a perfectly orthodox Cornelian application of the distinction between *latria* and *dulia* degrees of veneration.[3]

Rather than provide plot synopses and analyses of martyr-themed plays or even the ones published in the capital during the mid-1630s to the mid-1640s, Semk devotes the third and fourth chapters to three plays by Corneille, Desfontaines, and Rotrou. These two chapters are closely argued and persuasive and, not always the case in such a monograph, may be read as standalone studies. In terms of dramaturgy and theology, the book’s central chapter is the fourth, “*Polyeucte, Martyr* and Corneille’s Sacramental Poetics,” providing thought-provoking insights into Corneille’s cryptic play, perhaps the work that generates the most disparate interpretations out of his entire corpus. André Gide believed that the martyr-hero behaved more like a recalcitrant revolutionary than as a Christian, a view echoed by Terry Eagleton who judges that “Jesus’s engagingly human reluctance to die contrasts with that of a character like Corneille’s Polyeucte, who puts his life recklessly on the line with all of the zealous imprudence of the neophyte.”[4] Semk, on the other hand, sensitively argues for a profound sacramentality on the part of the dramatist, pointing out that there is hardly any scholarship examining “the sacramental or representational nature of the relationship between the Church and the stage in early modern France” (p. 95). Semk therefore deploys critical work by researchers specializing in English drama, including Anthony Dawson, Paul Yanchin, and Regina Schwartz.[5] The chapter emphasizes that the spectacular moments of *Polyeucte*—the protagonist’s baptism; the smashing of the idols; the martyrdoms of Néarque and Polyeucte—all take place off-stage. It is therefore a decidedly non-histrionic play. In this, the action echoes the liturgical action of the mass, whose grand gestures and moments (the offertory; consecration of the elements; celebrant’s communion) remain unseen and unheard by the congregation, with the elevation being a sneak peek at what is hidden.[6] The ceremony of the mass is also a staging (Semk notes that stage planks in French comes from an older word for altar dais) where the celebrant has to enact fixed actions and gestures, acting as an *alter Christus*. This affinity may partly account for ecclesiastical suspicion of theater; actors were excommunicated and had to renounce their profession in order to be receive the final sacraments, despite Cardinal Richelieu being an enthusiastic patron of the art and commissioning several professional plays. A moment encapsulating the tensions between performers and the Church during the seventeenth century is to be found in the memoirs of the Abbé de Choisy. Cross-dressed and disguised as a young widow styled the Comtesse de Barres, the cleric suggests to the archbishop of Bourges that certain scenes of *Polyeucte* be performed during a social visit marking his visitation to a rural area outside of the city (with Choisy’s teenaged protégée playing the role of Pauline and Choisy as Sévère). The prelate is initially horrified, only to be persuaded not that private performance falls outside the prohibition on the stage but rather that it is taking place in the provinces and the subject is, in any case, not profane.[7] It is clear that the archbishop was expected to object and the choice of play is instructive since, as Semk illustrates, *Polyeucte* was a particular target of anti-theatrical moralists. The truly subversive performance is, of course, Choisy’s pseudo-identity and masking of his gender (and clerical status).

The second chapter, “The Spectacle of Martyrdom and the Spectacle of the Stage,” looks at the corporeal violence on the stage, particularly in two plays on Saint Eustache by Balthasar Baro and Nicolas Mary Desfontaines in the 1640s. This saint had a widely known and hugely popular legend involving the protagonist’s family being abducted by pirates, his miraculous conversion while hunting, and the entire family being reunited only to be executed in a brazen bull. Semk proposes that the dramatization of the epic tale runs counter to the “prevailing trend in tragic drama toward a coherent, rational, and intelligible plot” (p. 61). The family’s imperviousness to the barbaric instrument of torture highlights an unsettling paradox in the martyr: God grants them endurance and spares them from feeling pain yet the embracing of such torments are what defines the martyr’s witness. The third chapter, “Ex histrionis martyr factus”: Genesisius, Acting, and Martyrdom,” discusses the two plays depicting saint Genest by Desfontaines and Rotrou which were produced and published during the 1640s. The original legend is a fascinating one: called on by the emperor to perform a play mocking Christians, the renowned actor Genesisius converts during the performance, although this is not

immediately apparent. Semk proposes that the narrative is, in one sense, that of a terrible actor who goes off-script and ad libs. However, it could also be claimed that they get into the role so much as to transform into what is being played, the ultimate performance, in what Christian Biet has termed “la transsubstantiation théâtrale.”[8] These plays tap into the notion of transcendence, spiritual and performative, reminding us that essence of literature is to pull us away from reality and it is striking that both writers devote lines to the craft of acting the creation of illusion. Derrida argues that literature cannot help but lend itself to a transcendent reading, however complicated or obtuse this might appear, and the on-stage conversion of Genest in a play’s meta-play is as much an acute instance of the potency of art as a representation of the ineffable nature of grace.[9]

Readers might disagree with the author’s conclusions. For example, with respect to the character of Sévère in Corneille’s *Polyeucte*, whom Semk views as an enlightened skeptic, the epitome of a noble man defeated in love, drawing unexpected parallels between the depiction of Sévère and the representation of Julian the Apostate in Montaigne. In this way, “Sévère’s spectatorship, then, is firmly grounded in a human, rational, and even skeptical appreciation of the conversions [of Pauline and Félix]” (p. 114). For Semk, who devotes seven pages to the forlorn figure, Sévère “embodies the gaze of the spectator, frames the conversions as marvelous without however recognizing their supernatural quality” (p. 119) affording the character a pivotal role as a kind of dramatic intermediary. On the other hand, it might also be argued that Sévère is a failed character (dramatically and psychologically) whose function is little more than a cipher as the “straight man” to the absurd converted zeal of those around him. However, the possibility of wildly disparate readings of Cornelian characters is a hallmark of the playwright—and of any memorable text. Above all, Semk himself is not prescriptive in his thoughts on martyr drama, echoing one of his principal points: neither were most of the dramatists who delved into the topic.

There are occasional lapses in terms of typographical errors and in (Catholic) terminology (for example, Carthusians are monks not friars [p. 26] and, indeed, are the most austere and enclosed religious order whereas friars are semi-cloistered) and seeking one’s own martyrdom was already condemned by the Council in Elvira c. 305 rather than the later Council of Arles in 452 (p. 99), closer to the historical Polyeuctus’s martyrdom in the mid-third century. While Semk’s translations are very fluid and he makes use of modern critical editions, his choice of original orthography in French citations, particularly in not resolving i/j and u/v, will not please every reader. These are all minor misgivings and do not detract from a work that is beautifully thought-out, displays effortless erudition, and has much to offer any scholar or student interested in literature, religion, or the interplay of both. *Playing the Martyr* is an accomplished study, liberally peppered with well-chosen and pertinent anecdotes and observations, managing to maintain that elusive balance of erudition and readability. While Semk concentrates on a handful of plays, he is also adept at picking out tantalizing tidbits from some of the lesser-known versions. *Dipné, Infante d’Irlande* (1668) by François d’Avre was written for and dedicated to Eléonor de Rohan, a Benedictine abbess. The play’s subject, a beautiful Irish princess, converts to Christianity and spurns her father’s incestuous advances, for which she is murdered, an odd work to present to a cloistered nun as a form of distraction from her abbatial duties (pp. 10-12). The topic of martyrs, or more broadly hagiographic literature, has interested scholars for a couple of decades, giving rise to fresh readings of individual plays, authors, or saints.[10] Christopher Semk’s book is a welcome contribution to this field and proves that researchers should not overlook, nor overgeneralize, this window into the early modern period.

NOTES

[1] Katherine Ibbett, *The Style of the State in French Theatre, 1630–1660: Neoclassicism and Government* (Abingdon: Ashgate, 2009), pp. 45-46.

[2] See, for example, Jean-Vincent Blanchard’s contemporary contextualization of the martyr (notably *Polyeucte*) in “Beyond Belief: Sovereignty and the Spectacle of Martyrdom in Early Modern France,” *Seventeenth-Century French Studies* 36 (2014):94-108 (particularly 107-8).

- [3] Pierre Corneille, *Œuvres complètes*, ed. Georges Couton, 3 vols (Paris: Gallimard, 1980–87), I, 979.
- [4] André Gide, *Journal 1939–1949: souvenirs* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960), 92; Terry Eagleton, *Sweet Violence: The Idea of the Tragic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 37.
- [5] Anthony Dawson and Paul Yanchin, *The Culture of Playgoing in Shakespeare's England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001); Regina Schwartz, *Sacramental Politics at the Dawn of Secularism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).
- [6] I have argued that Rotrou's *Véritable Saint-Genest* contains many liturgical paraphrases and that its structure imitates the different parts of the eucharist; Paul Scott, "Rotrou et la comédie de dévotion," *Littératures Classiques* 63 (2007):85-96.
- [7] François-Timoléon de Choisy, 'Mémoires de l'abbé de Choisy habillé en femme', in *Mémoires de l'abbé de Choisy*, ed. by Georges Mongrédien (Paris: Mercure de France, 2000), pp. 429–522 (pp. 511-12).
- [8] Christian Biet, "La souffrance scénique du martyr au début du XVIIe siècle," *Corps sanglants, souffrants et macabres (XVIe—XVIIe siècle)*, ed. Charlotte Bouteille-Meister and Kjerstin Aukrust (Paris: Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2010), pp. 243-56.
- [9] Jacques Derrida, *Acts of Literature*, ed. Derek Attridge (NY and Abingdon: Routledge, 1992), pp. 43-47.
- [10] Some noteworthy examples are Anne Teulade, *Le Saint mis en scène. Un personnage paradoxal* (Paris: Cerf, 2012), who works especially on the literary aspects of religious drama in early modern France and Spain; Michael Meere, "Theatres of Torture: Martyrs, Pagans, and the Politics of Conversion in Early Seventeenth-Century France," *Early Modern French Studies* 37 (2015):14-28, who probes visual violence; Theresa Varney Kennedy, who explores plays of St. Catherine of Alexandria by female playwrights in *Women's Deliberation: The Heroine in Early Modern Women's Theater (1650—1750)* (London and NY: Routledge, 2018), pp. 62-68; and Jason Hartford who works on the notion of the queer martyr grounded in the Catholic tradition in *Sexuality, Iconography, and Fiction in French: Queering the Martyr* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

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