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Goulven Oiry. *La Comédie française et la ville (1550-1650): L'Iliade parodique*. Bibliothèque de la Renaissance, 78. Series editors: Mireille Huchon, François Roudaut. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2015. 793 pp. Appendices, notices, bibliography, and indices. \$39.95 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-2-8124-3820-2.

Review by Kathleen A. Loysen, Montclair State University.

This is a massive work, which takes as its central objective to prove the thesis that French comic theater produced between 1550 and 1650 was a conscious attempt on the part of the playwrights to parody Homer's *Iliad*. While in the end I found this argument to be overly categorical, ignoring any evidence which did not fit neatly into the pre-established paradigm, at the same time, no other comprehensive study of the plays Goulven Oiry examines here has ever been written through the precise lens he brings to his subject matter. Therefore, Oiry has contributed enormously to our understanding of the comedic theatrical output of the time, and he brings a fresh perspective to the subject matter.

This fresh perspective is due mainly to its interdisciplinary nature (Oiry is a scholar of both early modern French literature and of urbanism). The book is divided into three main sections, which he terms "Actes": *La Ville dans la comédie*, *La Comédie dans la ville*, and *Le théâtre comique et la ville, enjeux d'une affinité élective*. These sections are preceded by both a prologue and an epilogue, and at the end of the volume there are a series of extremely useful tables (enumerating the cities, specific sites in Paris, and socio-economic status of each character in each of the plays) and indices (of authors, works, and places), as well as a bibliography covering his corpus, other texts from the period, and the extensive body of critical literature he consulted. All of this provides a fundamental overview for any scholar of the theater of the period.

The study takes as its point of departure the notion that previous critics have not sufficiently recognized the degree to which French comic theater of the period 1550-1650 is anchored in urban life. Oiry relates how in this selection of plays the city is conceptualized as a theatrical space in and of itself—the familiar *theatrum mundi* topos—with the comings and goings of multiple characters and their intersecting lives. Furthermore, the characters that one would encounter in the real-world city are the very *types* that also appear in the plays: *le soldat fanfaron*, *le parasite*, *les amoureux*, *les pères*, etc. Oiry pinpoints a transitional moment in the history of the theater in which what was seen as comical evolved from the personal, the particular, and the private (for instance, the well-known medieval domestic farce), to the public and the civic. While the word *comédie* had been used in France since the fourteenth century, at first to refer to

any play, the term progressively started to denote only plays with a happy ending, and only such plays which consciously imitated ancient or Italian models. This is the comic theater that began to be theorized and promoted by the Pléïade poets in the middle of the sixteenth century, and Oiry posits that over the subsequent hundred years, we see “la comédie change de statut: de genre secondaire et peu théorisé, elle s’affirme comme l’un des spectacles les plus prisés du public cultivé” (p. 10).

During this same time period, Oiry contends, the theater world became more codified and institutionalized; here, he links theater history to social history. He notes that all major European cities saw massive population growth from 1500 to 1650, even accounting for the depletion of the Wars of Religion; Paris, in fact, doubled its population between 1560 and 1645 (to a half-million). Also, the cities themselves were becoming more consciously constructed—as opposed to the haphazard nature of the medieval city. Moreover, “city culture” was spreading; even outside of the major metropolitan areas, scholars note a developing urban/urbane ethos, with a concomitant rise of the bourgeoisie and of capitalism. The theater world developed along similar lines: in mid-sixteenth century France, theater was an open-air phenomenon, performed unregulated in the streets. By the end of Louis XIII’s reign, on the other hand, it was performed in well-established *salles*. Specific times and spaces devoted to theater began to be delineated, and many laws arose regarding play performance; from Richelieu forward, Oiry describes a process of regularization and centralization, a “sédentarisation” (p. 22) of the theater.

Most critics tend to divide French theater of 1550-1650 into three neat periods: humanist comedy of 1550-1610; Cornelian comedy of 1630-1640; and pre-Molièresque comedy of 1640-1660. Oiry’s goal, on the other hand, is to make these three periods into one, which necessitates a consideration of the corpus over the long term, from Charles Estienne’s *L’Andrie* (1542) through to Claude de l’Estoile’s *L’Intrigue des filous* (1648). His intention is a re-interpretative one: while he covers 52 comic plays, it is important to understand that none of these are newly discovered. On the contrary, all of the plays that he examines are already available in modern editions and have been the subject of prior critical analysis. His is not an archival approach, therefore, but exactly the opposite: his goal is to shed new light on an already-known corpus and to demonstrate that it says something other than what we had previously thought. This is an intriguing prospect; however, this new message is not sufficiently foregrounded at the beginning of the work. The reader must wait until nearly the very end of the volume to fully understand what Oiry sees as entirely *new* about his interpretation of this set of plays: the notion that they are all parodic *Iliads*.

The period 1550-1650 itself is often seen as transitional, “between” the medieval and the classical, and consequently the plays of the period are often seen as fitting into one of two categories: either breaking with the medieval tradition or serving as precursors to the classical. Oiry’s goal, on the other hand, is to depict the evolution from medieval to classical not as a clean break but as a gradual development, emphasizing continuity over rupture. By positing that French comic theater of the time is a uniquely urban phenomenon, he also brings urban anthropology into the mix. Moreover, his claims are audacious: not only is the city the place in which theater developed; not only can urban life be conceptualized as theatrical; and not only is comic theater a mimetic representation of urban life—but also, more boldly, comic theater “s’affirme comme le genre dramatique en charge de représenter la ville quotidienne” (p. 22). Beyond merely recuperating the referential nature of the genre, an aspect which he sees others

minimizing in their criticism (he mentions Madeleine Lazard in particular [pp. 18, 23, 411, 592, etc.]), he sees *effets de réel* as a midway point *between* materiality and idealism. By marrying literary criticism to urban studies—the sociology, philosophy, and history of the city—and by building this relationship between text and society and analyzing the text within its real-world spatial context and as a medium for representing space and urban life, he wants to defend a “lecture urbaine de la comédie” (p. 27). Accordingly, based on this reading of comic theater, he wants to contribute to an anthropology of city life: he develops “une conviction croisée: la considération de son ancrage urbain relance l’interprétation de la comédie; la prise en compte de la comédie nourrit une sémiologie de la ville” (p. 27).

In the three main sections of the book, Oiry touches on the social function of theater, as well as on the theatrical dimensions of how society itself operates. *Acte I (La Ville dans la comédie)* focuses on the ways in which French comic theater from 1550-1650 is city-centered (depictions of city scenes, urban characters, etc). *Acte II (La Comédie dans la ville)* explores how city life itself was theatrical and *spectaculaire*. The final *Acte III (Le théâtre comique et la ville, enjeux d’une affinité élective)* is where he more fully develops these links between city and theater, and also between both city and theater on the one hand, and war and sexuality on the other. It is in this final section that he explains his central thesis, seen in the subtitle of the book, that “la comédie est une ‘Iliade’ parodique” (p. 30).

And it is this final leap that I found the least convincing: the leap from seeing the city on the stage and the stage in the city, to interpreting the entire comic theater enterprise of 1550-1650 as a persistent attempt to represent and re-represent the taking of the city/the woman. What is more, it is only on page 423 that the reader comes upon this most succinct version of Oiry’s thesis: “*Toute* comédie s’apparente à un combat burlesque, à une petite ‘Iliade.’ Il s’agit *toujours* de faire tomber des ‘murailles.’ Il s’agit *toujours* de (re)prendre Hélène” (emphasis added). This strict paradigm was then imposed upon every one of the 52 plays under investigation: the on-stage seduction of a young girl by devious means, necessarily and every time was a burlesque representation of the *Iliad*. The problem then, for the reader of Oiry’s work, must become: what are we to do with any plays published during this same time period which do not fit the prototype? What are we to do with any aspects of those plays which do not support the hypothesis? The overly-categorical “*toute* comédie” and “il s’agit *toujours*” result in a lack of engagement with potential counter-evidence. While Oiry does begin to flesh out the question of whether the parodic venture was all a *conscious* move on the part of the playwrights: “Les textes font-ils suffisamment référence et référence suffisamment explicite au mythe troyen pour que nous nous autorisions à parler d’Homère travesti’ à propos de la comédie?” (p. 526), this question is never sufficiently answered. And, while Oiry certainly enumerates plenty of allusions to boundaries being transgressed in order to gain access to the woman as prize—the boundaries of the city and of the paternal home—the idea of the girl as material object to be exchanged between father and lover/husband is not a new topos, nor is it exclusive to these plays. The blending of militaristic and sexualized language to describe the amorous quest is likewise familiar territory. And none of this necessarily suggests that these playwrights consciously had Homer’s *Iliad* in mind when composing their marriage comedies (“L’intrigue est en effet tendue vers un seul but, le mariage” [p. 397]). The conclusion of the book is therefore too broad: “La guerre parodique est le véritable tissu conjonctif du récit comique. Le genre comique est une ‘fantaisie de triomphe’ en ce sens. L’enjeu de l’intrigue est de prendre femme comme on prendrait une cité” (p. 458). Nonetheless, I found this to be a compelling, well-researched, and thought-provoking work of scholarship, bringing an innovative

theoretical lens to a corpus of plays not often studied as a cohesive set.

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