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Clare Siviter, *Tragedy and Nation in the Age of Napoleon*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press and the Voltaire Foundation, 2020. xvii + 378 pp. Illustrations, notes, bibliography, and index. \$99.99 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9781789621051.

Reviewed by Logan J. Connors, University of Miami (FL)

Clare Siviter states early in her book that nobody has ever written a comprehensive study of tragedy during the age of Napoleon. At first glance, most readers might wonder: *how could this be true?* Napoleon was an avid theater enthusiast, and particularly, of tragedy. It is now common knowledge that the Emperor and his administrators took theater very seriously by creating an elaborate system of theater districts and, we thought, by establishing tight censorship rules. As Rahul Markovitz and others have shown, Napoleon was so enamored of theater and its cultural value, that he went so far as to send actors from the Comédie-Française into occupied European capitals and military outposts to perform tragedies by Corneille, Racine, and Voltaire. [1] Many theater historians would immediately associate Napoleon with the tragic genre and with the idea that the Emperor used theater to boost his own precarious political situation by fabricating a bond to the art and ideologies of Ancient Greece and Rome. And yet, who among us can name a single new tragedy that was performed in France from 1799 to 1815?

Siviter takes on both of these issues—new theatrical creation and engagement with the theatrical and political past—in (yes, indeed it's true) the first comprehensive study of performed and unperformed tragedies from the Napoleonic era. Her goals are multiple and overlapping. Overall, Siviter seeks to demonstrate that “tragedy was instrumental in efforts to help reconstruct the nation after Revolution” (p. 2), and more specifically, that retooled classical tragedies, new tragic creations, particular performance environments, and “lateral” (not necessarily top-down) forms of censorship created a vibrant and rich theatrical culture, which ultimately enabled French women and men to mediate the traumas of the Revolution and reimagine a new State. Tragedy, Siviter claims, was by no means a retrograde genre that failed to connect to spectators and readers, but rather, a powerful vehicle to convey and debate national symbols and ideas, canonical texts, and “examples of behavior to be embodied by the new nation” (p. 9).

Siviter divides her book into two parts. The first part includes three chapters dedicated to Napoleon's imposition of a “classical” tragic canon that had already been rewritten and readapted during the Old Regime and Revolutionary years. Chapter one details eighteenth-century modifications to Cornelian and Racinian tragedy and describes the exact type of tragic *patrimoine* that made its way to the early nineteenth-century stage. This context served as the “intertheatrical backdrop for Napoleonic performances” (p. 40) and reveals the flexibility and

dynamism of plays that have long been conceptualized as static pillars of *grand siècle* greatness. Chapter two focuses on rewritings of the past through changes to tragic works during the Napoleonic years, when dramatic authors attempted to tap into the nation's domestic and international concerns. In chapter three, Siviter describes how changes to classical tragedies altered the depiction of heroism, a theme about which Napoleon was particularly concerned and eager to deploy in a process of self-fashioning across multiple media and institutions.

Part two consists of six chapters and is dedicated solely to new tragic productions from 1799 to 1815. Chapter four is an informative, thick description of "the path of a play from composition to reception" (p. 111), including an account of how censorship functioned (or failed) under Napoleon. Chapter five details the use of antiquity, including ancient Greece, Rome, and the Middle East, in new tragic productions that were either performed at the Comédie-Française or published in France at the time. Chapter six takes on new plays that portrayed "the East" and the "Orient," places that were popular dramatic settings during the Old Regime, but which had special currency during Napoleon's more expansionist years. Chapter seven is almost exclusively focused on dramatic flops that were unperformed or spurned by audiences, not necessarily because they weren't very good, but rather, because they portrayed populations and places that were at odds with France's foreign policy and war efforts under Napoleon: Britain, Spain, Italy, Russia, German-speaking lands, and more. In chapter eight, Siviter shows that Napoleon's identificatory constructs, such as associating himself with Charlemagne, often mapped on to new tragedies depicting the Middle Ages. She includes here, however, the important caveat that the most propagandistic and simplistic works from the period, such as François Joseph Depuntis's *Clovis*, were often miserable failures and that attempts to stage overtly "pro-government play[s]" could easily "backfire" (p. 255). Siviter dedicates her final chapter to the tragic staging of France's national history, arguing that the historical and aesthetic proximity of these performances created a unique type of "courtroom where the recent past was put on trial and where contemporaries debated the historical wounds of the Revolution" (p. 258). Siviter concludes by reinforcing her thesis that tragedy during the Napoleonic era "helped the reconstruction of the nation via the mediation of the Revolution" and allowed a debate to achieve a public venue that was "generally not possible in the political sphere" at the time (p. 290).

The strengths of Siviter's book are numerous. The study is unambiguously comprehensive. She leaves no stone unturned in a quest to show how "a variety of agents" used "tragedy and its rewriting of history" to ultimately make "an impact on French politics, culture and society in an attempt to reconstruct the French nation" (p. 16). Her typology of tragic dramas that were written and/or performed during the Napoleonic era is logical and effective at showing that tragedy at the time was indeed a diverse and malleable genre, and in no way was it ossified or indicative of a yearning for any sort of *real* return to the past. The (fictionalized) historical past, of course, was essential to Napoleon's self-fashioning as Emperor, and vital to his attempt to link France's volatile present to the formidable empires of the ancient Mediterranean and the French *Grand Siècle*. Siviter proves that the artistic construction of these historic bridges was complex and that the results on stage were often quite impressive.

Siviter's deliberate attempt to wrestle the critical narrative of Napoleonic era theater from the hands of disdainful Romanticists and anti-Napoleon scholars of the Third Republic is also a success. She carefully describes the path of a play from its conception to its performance, reception, and publication, overturning the idea held by many that censorship under the Emperor was always a top-down process of State suppression. Siviter shows instead that censorship was

often self-imposed, that it was “not a simple, straightforward process,” and that it was “incoherent,” thus “strongly contesting the idea of Restoration scholars that Napoleonic censorship was so strong that it inhibited any novelty” (p. 102). Siviter presents a variety of agents who held sway in making decisions about theater: the Emperor himself, of course, but also the actors at the Comédie-Française, tragic authors and their associates, and even “the presence of multiple cabals and political parties in the auditorium” (p. 120). All in all, Siviter thoroughly dismantles the notion that Napoleonic France was a “police state” when it came to theater, arguing instead that it was a rich site of contestation and negotiation and that tragic drama at the time, and not only works by Corneille, Racine, and Voltaire, enabled many of the aesthetic debates that would usher in Romanticism.

Any possible critiques of Siviter’s book are few and minor in scope. The author claims that Napoleonic *tragédies nationales* were a sort of theatricalized courtroom “where the recent past was put on trial” (p. 258). Siviter goes on to argue that tragedy’s most theoretically interesting subgenre under Napoleon, the *tragédie nationale*, “went further in its treatment of the recent national past than Revolution or Restoration tragic productions would do” (p. 286). This would be difficult to measure. The Revolution, for example, was witness to an explosion of theatrical works that depicted recent battles and events of national importance, including victories and losses of the Republican army and the deaths of Revolutionary-era heroes. *Tragédie nationale* was an essential subgenre during the 1790s, and, as Siviter demonstrates, it continued to flourish into the early nineteenth century. But was it *more* innovative or pervasive under Napoleon than during the Revolution? Difficult to say, but perhaps this sort of “innovation competition”—pitting one era’s aesthetic feats against another’s—is what got Napoleonic tragedy jettisoned into critical oblivion in the first place. More importantly, is tragedy the most appropriate and efficient dramatic genre in which the theatrical “courtroom” should operate? Or would genres with particular currency during the Revolution that perhaps waned under Napoleon—genres with more explicit goals of modeling contemporary and recent behavior, such as the *drame*, *trait historique*, *pièce patriotique*, or even comedy—better enable the aesthetic of proximity and reenactment required for a theatricalized “courtroom”? (The *drame* and comedy, for example, feature prominently in Yann Robert’s excellent recent book about how theatrical performances modeled certain features of a courtroom experience both before and during the Revolution.[2]) Siviter is on more sure footing when she astutely reads Napoleonic tragedy against and with the Revolution’s theatrical and aesthetic achievements and when she judiciously centers Napoleonic tragedy as the *sine qua non* condition for Romanticism and for establishing a debate on classicism, novelty, and theatrical *patrimoine* that continues to this day.

All in all, Siviter’s book is a masterful achievement of erudition, a fine collection of close readings of tragedies, and a detailed reassessment of Napoleon’s cultural politics. The author’s writing is clear and free of jargon, she weaves contemporary theoretical works from Theatre and Performance Studies and from reception theory into her analysis with tact and precision, and the summaries of Napoleonic tragedies included in the appendix are extremely helpful. It should be no surprise that Siviter’s book will interest scholars and students of French theater, cultural history, and Napoleonic studies. But what is more, this book should be required reading for contemporary theater experts as well as *dix-neuviémistes*, who have often been reluctant to engage with theater and art under Napoleon. Propagandistic at times, boring at others, not all tragedies performed under Napoleon were exciting mediations of the recent Revolution or the insecure present. Yet, many were, and thanks to Siviter’s *Tragedy and Nation*, we are now better equipped to read those tragedies, teach them, adapt them to the stage, and appreciate their value.

## NOTES

[1] Rahul Markovits, *Civiliser l'Europe: politiques du théâtre français au XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 2014), esp. pp. 266-308.

[2] Yann Robert, *Dramatic Justice: Trial by Theater in the Age of the French Revolution* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2018), esp. pp. 23-88.

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