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Hélène E. Bilis and Ellen McClure, eds., *Teaching French Neoclassical Tragedy*. Options for teaching, volume 55. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2021. x + 363 pp. \$85.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9-78-1603295307; \$36.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 9-78-1603295314.

Review by Edward Forman, University of Bristol.

This volume contains an introduction and twenty-two separate essays arranged in five parts. The parts highlight poetics, performance, politics and technologies as foci of recurrent interest, whilst a glance through individual essay titles reveals both a respect for aspects that might be considered traditional—"Place and Space," "Tragic Aesthetics," "Reflections on Free Will," "Corneille versus the Académie Française"—alongside others that demonstrate more experimental approaches—"The Power of the Female Spectator," "Hypotyposis as a Pedagogical Tool," "The Public Theater of Saint-Domingue," "Multicultural France," "A Queer Eye," "The Digital Sphere." The interaction of such diverse contributions from twenty-six colleagues proves consistently rich and challenging, and the attention remains admirably focussed on pedagogical strategies throughout.

One obvious and inevitable question is who the volume is aimed at, linked to a worry that it will fall between stools. Academic teachers who have remained loyal to the study of the classics in their syllabi will scarcely need to be told how to do it, or what adaptations will be needed to fit their courses to the twenty-first century; but will these essays reach, let alone convert, those whose interests lie elsewhere? In practice, the emphasis within the collection on descriptions of actual courses, rather than theoretical blueprints, make it eminently user-friendly and stimulating for the former group, and we can hope that one or two readers within any given institution, on the look-out for innovative structures, might be tempted to explore the possibilities of a return to the (neo)classics at least as one element in a module.

Some contributions, including Blair Hoxby's and Jennifer Tamas's, are quite candidly defensive about the incorporation of early modern material in a theatre course aimed at American students, widely caricatured as illiterate philistines whose motivation in higher education is simply to increase their earning capacity—a motivation often underlined by university administrators and politicians. Jennifer nicely turns the anticipated scepticism of her class ("our students and their parents want to know why they are being asked to spend money on reading seventeenth-century French tragedies", p. 147) into a foundational tenet of her course: by persuading them to embrace a hope that this class will in some way be "useful" after all, she can introduce at a subliminal level the concepts of suspension of disbelief, and hence of *vraisemblance*! The volume manages to maintain a slightly uneasy equilibrium between two answers to this problem: the earning gap

between humanities and STEM majors is commonly exaggerated by surveys, and in any case the formation of rounded adult citizens depends on much more than their degree major. “Curiosity-driven learning”, which feels from this evidence to be a concept less comfortably integrated into American than British syllabi, is made an explicit learning outcome by these two contributors: “my primary aim is to promote the cultural or rounded intellectual and emotional development of my students” (Hoxby, p. 142), and “teaching neoclassical tragedy” (in a module focussing on performance) “built confidence and success while fostering fresh interest in literature” (Tamas, p. 156). And this is not entirely idealistic, “for the students we teach today will be the parents, decision makers and donors of the future” (Hoxby, p. 142).

The lamentable lack of an index conceals both the frequency with which Shakespeare is mentioned, and the consistent thrust of references to him: as Jeffrey Leichman puts it, Shakespeare is “the most universally shared experience for American students” and “the comparison can be revealing” (p. 289). Several other essays acknowledge the need to engage students “whose previous exposure to neoclassical literature, French history, and tragedy and the theater more generally, might be minimal” (p. 15). Some of the direct comparisons between French classicism and Shakespeare are thematic rather than formal. Leichman deals with the concept of kingship; Toby Wikström compares *Othello* with a more-or-less contemporaneous French play, *Le More cruel*; John D. Lyons’s discussion of “Fate, Freedom and the Tragic World” assumes that most students will approach tragedy with preconceptions instilled by a Bradleian interpretation of Shakespeare as the depiction of “humans in the grip of fate” (p. 44)—preconceptions which Lyons carefully but imaginatively dismembers with reference to historical analysis of the lexicon of destiny in French, Aristotle, seventeenth-century background texts relating both drama theory and the history of religious beliefs, and finally the dramatic texts themselves.

What seems to be most lacking in these comparisons and contrasts is any grappling with the most fundamental difference between the Shakespearean and the classical tragic tradition, and a major stumbling-block for many Anglo-Saxon students, namely the unity of tone, which for me encapsulates the specificity of French classical tragedy much more clearly and importantly than the more mechanistic aspects of time, place, and action. Bilis and McClure’s introduction contains a deft summary of those three (*sic*) unities, and does refer to the seventeenth century’s stress on “the dignity and elevation of the genre” (p. 11), but the absence from French plays of Shakespeare’s trademark use of comic relief surely deserves some exploration as the main feature which marks French classicism out as alien for many of our students. Leichman’s essay refers to the clownish elements in Césaire’s *Le Roi Christophe*, but treats them as Brechtian rather than Shakespearean. Ellen R. Welch draws our attention to Collectif La Palmera’s version of *Andromaque* which “demystifies the canonical tragedy [by studding] the first two acts with playful or spectacular interludes” (p. 205), but none of the contributors mentioned Thomas le Douarec’s flamenco-inspired interpretation of *Le Cid* which turned the king into a straightforwardly comic character, a sort of mad King Herod. My students used to love expatiating (often more dogmatically than me, even) on why this was wrong, and why it fundamentally changed the moral tone of the ending. Comparison with Shakespeare and “what he might have done” was a fruitful subtheme of such discussions, if only initially at the level of bolting a *Romeo and Juliet* ending onto *Le Cid*—Chimène just needs a phial of poison down her cleavage in Act V, scene 5. But the choice of illustrative material is obviously to some extent serendipitous, and it is a strength of the volume that many other essays stress the adaptability of their teaching strategies to encapsulate whatever productions and adaptations happen to be

available in a given semester. Lyons includes in his essay a cautionary refusal to assume that characters really mean what they say about their freedoms and choices. “It is likely, I think, that characters who could be described as having brought about some catastrophe by their own actions will be the ones who complain that an irresistible external power is responsible for their situation” (p. 46). It was initially frustrating that this essay ended rather abruptly just as it reached the apparent nub of the argument, but on reflection this is a clear strength of the article and of the book as a whole, which is not about telling students what to think, but rather about showing them how to ask more interesting questions.

The contribution by Larry Norman and David Wray, similarly, uses close textual readings to describe how they engaged both undergraduate and graduate scholars from a wide range of disciplines with the theory and practice of adaptation across an impressive selection of Phaedra texts—Ovid, as well as Euripides and Seneca, through Racine (contextualized via Corneille but again not by comparison with Shakespeare) to Jules Dassin as well as Sarah Kane, and with a generous invitation to readers to “use it as a kind of menu from which future syllabi may choose items à la carte” (p. 41). Their suggested bibliography of critical and theoretical readings feels curiously conventional (Bénichou, Steiner, Spitzer) in comparison with their inventive and adventurous approach to classroom experience, but I greatly enjoyed imagining the relish with which Larry Norman would have picked up some of the unpredictable lightbulb moments that are bound to emerge from imaginative and experiential teaching of this sort: when “Phèdre suddenly ‘remembers’ the Euripidean version of her own story” (*Phèdre*, III, 2), Racine exploits awareness of the “dissonant coexistence” of mythological variants within and between texts and thereby “made his heroine a predecessor for characters like Flaubert’s Emma Bovary” (p. 32). Did the ensuing discussion really grapple, though, with the fundamental difference this makes to the tragedy: in Euripides, Hippolytos is the tragic victim and Phaedra merely a passive agent...?

The volume puts a most welcome spotlight on the theory and practice of “research-led teaching” or “teaching in a research environment,” although this leads at times to slight (and illuminating) tensions. Jeffrey Peters has knowledge of the development of the understanding of space and place as philosophical concepts; Faith Beasley, of the development and influence of female-driven salon culture. It is therefore entirely appropriate that they develop modules within syllabi that bring their expertise to bear on the unity of place and related topics, and on the moral analysis of the characters and plot of *Le Cid*, respectively. That is what a university is for. I too am affected by some of their insights derived from those perspectives and will take account of them in my teaching of plays from the period. But of course those insights will in practice be jostling for position in my teaching plans, my mind and the practicalities of classroom teaching between the thousands of other angles, perspectives and insights I have received from colleagues and from students over many years. Those two essays demonstrate how specialist expertise can be used to inform fresh analyses of familiar texts, but reveal the slight risk that using a text to illustrate a theoretical standpoint may inhibit the students’ excited, but much more random responses to completely different facets of the objects of study.

Other essays explore the use of excerpts from classical tragedy in different pedagogical contexts. Juliette Cherbuliez creatively demonstrates how the dramatic *récits* that constitute a major recurrent feature of seventeenth-century drama can be used in one-off introductory sessions for diverse groups, in language classes at several levels, or in seminars on theatre theory and practice, to explore dramatic conventions and their subversion, figurative language, or extra-literary topics such as the politics of witness reliability—whilst at the same time developing

students' confidence in their own ability to communicate and persuade in an unfamiliar form of French! (Her referencing of online resources, including audio versions of the speeches she analyses, is particularly helpful.)

In a context prioritizing teaching strategies, it is not surprising that several contributions ring the changes on the mock trial as a means of encouraging both close textual reading and ethical debate. Marc Bizer relates his detailed analysis of the balance of responsibility between Phèdre and Oenone to both seventeenth-century and modern (although already rather dated) controversies about the relationship between political and personal responsibility, although we might wonder how many students would be helped by his comparing Trézène to Rabelais's utopian society at Thélème; and his analysis, although astute, seems to downplay sympathy for Oenone. Such mock trials are not confined to the characters within plays: Theresa Varney Kennedy and David Jortner place Corneille himself in the dock as students role-play his critics and supporters in an imaginative reconstruction of the *querelle du Cid*. The degree of preparation envisaged may seem daunting to some, but if the nature of the game motivates students to familiarize themselves to the necessary extent with the details of classical drama theory no one is likely to complain!

Even more challenging might be Hélele Bilis's ambition to combine her students' close readings of at least *Bérénice* and *Le Cid* with an adventurous survey of the resources of Digital Humanities, including concepts such as "distant reading" (p. 345), "character space" (p. 350) and "operationalization" (p.350), all through the medium of French. If her students can indeed take Franco Moretti's character network map of *Hamlet* as a model for their own equivalents for one of the French plays they are studying, and then draw appropriate literary conclusions about French tragedy from that process, they will have developed greatly in knowledge, understanding and skills as a result. It was quite a relief to receive the clarification, in what turns out to be the final substantive paragraph of the volume, that those students "have come to understand that distant reading has little value without the careful close reading that spurs an intriguing question beforehand and will give meaning to the visualization afterward" (p. 355)--but that makes the enterprise seem even more daunting if envisaged at an undergraduate or even early masters level.

The claimed or supposed universality of classical theatre is effectively problematized by Ellen R. Welch, who points out the difficulty of promoting the study of Corneille and Racine in a diverse student population, when the French cultural scene, and the Comédie-Française in particular, remains obstinately homogeneous. The hashtag #OscarsSoWhite was reflected in 2016 with #MolieresSoWhite and a collective Décoloniser les Arts. An even more fundamental reappraisal of canonicity in relation to colonization is undertaken by Sylvaine Guyot in her analysis of two productions by the Congolese dancer and choreographer Faustin Linyekula. Picking up the fact that *Bérénice* is quintessentially a play about "othering" (it does sometimes take a genius to see the obvious), Linyekula managed to attain sufficient status to direct that play at the Comédie-Française in 2009 and to create a postcolonial, multicultural and cross-genre response to it, *Pour en finir avec Bérénice* at Avignon in 2010. Both productions were highly provocative and controversial, and Guyot explores their genesis, production, reception, and impact perceptively. It is perhaps a little frustrating that this most fascinating of essays is less likely than other contributions to be adaptable to fit into a student syllabus. It would be a brilliant topic for an independent research exercise within a syllabus looking at modern productions and adaptations of the classical repertoire, but then, for that context, Guyot has already done all the work.

Anna Rosensweig delicately negotiates another tightrope in grappling with these texts in a teaching context: that between reason and emotion. Admitting that she is asking students expressly to explore “what might be considered naïve or untrained responses to literature” (p. 325, n. 4), she nevertheless convincingly shows that taking the students’ affective response seriously (but without intruding on their personal space) actually enhances their intellectual engagement with the expression of deep passion, which is, after all, the key thematic element in almost all the works involved in such a syllabus. If “kings are overcome with rage” and “love leads both men and women to violate codes of propriety” (p. 315), an approach that sidelines the impact of feeling is almost bound to miss the point, whereas affective pedagogy “does not entail abandoning critical enquiry, but recognizes the role that emotions play in shaping our enquiry” (p. 324).

Almost all the essays concentrate on the central “classical” period of French tragedy, illustrating their arguments with plays from *Médée* to *Phèdre*. Two contributions look back to the pre-classical period. Andrea Frisch presents a direct comparison between Grévin’s *César* (1560) and Scudéry’s *La Mort de César* (1634), focussing both on the formal differences between the two as typical of pre-classical and classical tragedies, and on the strikingly different concepts of kingship that can be seen as reflecting the turbulent years of the Wars of Religion and the more confident leadership epitomized by Richelieu. Toby Wikström explores a range of topics related to globalization (early modern and modern) using neglected plays from the early seventeenth century that depict relationships between European traders or slaveowners and indigenous populations elsewhere in the world. Both of these open up very interesting debates, but raise the awkward issue of space in the syllabus: study of marginalized works does shed light on the mainstream canon, but few would want it to displace the latter, and if that is not to happen, how can it all be fitted in?

Two contributors push the temporal envelope in the opposite direction, both setting a Racine play alongside eighteenth-century texts to bring out continuities and contrasts. Sylvie Romanowski analyses *Britannicus* as both a reflection and a subversion of absolutism, the better to elucidate subsequent critiques of the ancien régime from Montesquieu to de Tocqueville. Laurence Marie brings Voltaire, Diderot, and Ducis in alongside Racine’s *Iphigénie* (both in its original version and in eighteenth-century adaptations) to illustrate a debate on the relationship between showing and telling in the dramatic presentation of violence and criminality. Hers is an essay that will be particularly helpful to colleagues: it describes a module that has clearly been taught in a classroom and turning that description into a blueprint for a very variable set of possible programmes. She also points to an impressive array of online visual resources. Another commendably flexible blueprint for a module that could be adapted to local circumstances—in particular, the availability of live performances to complement the use of recorded or online resources—is provided by Blair Hoxby. He proposes a course that focusses on performance skills and creativity in order to bring to life three or four contrasting theatrical traditions, which may (but not necessarily) include French classical theatre.

Julia Prest moves the focus not only into the eighteenth century, but across the Atlantic with a survey of performances of classical and neoclassical plays in Saint-Domingue between the 1770s and 1791. Her proposed undergraduate module is noteworthy for the extent to which it requires its students to develop independent research projects using digital resources. Both Julia’s global perspective, and the temporal expansion of Sylvie and Laurence, are matched by Jeffrey Leichman, who uses thematic, structural and stylistic parallels between *Cinna* and *La Tragédie*

du Roi Christophe to bring out continuities in the survival of neoclassical tragedy from the period of Richelieu to the present. His essay shows a greater tendency than some of the others to tell his readers to tell their students what they are supposed to be thinking, but still brings out how to use classroom (and virtual classroom) activities and open questions to generate discussion.

Two contributions, by H el ene Visentin and by John Boitano and Louise Thomas (the latter with a deserved acknowledgment of the foundational work by Buford Norman), broaden the scope of the volume in a generic direction, bringing in respectively the study of machine plays and of opera. If this seems somewhat “niche,” Boitano and Thomas put up a spirited defence: “if Racine, La Fontaine and other distinguished figures aspired to become Lully’s librettist, how is it possible that [...] courses have overlooked this significant genre” (p. 158)? Between them, the essays demonstrate the viability and relevance of modules that link literary analysis to the history of stagecraft, the broader history of science and technology, and the political implications of spectacular stage effects. These are also the only two essays to bring in the concept of the *merveilleux* as a counterpoint to the prevailing concentration on the *vraisemblable*.

A high proportion of the contributions helpfully offer alternative structures within which their insights and teaching strategies can be made available at either undergraduate or postgraduate level. The only case where this seems slightly implausible is Jennifer Row’s fascinating but challenging “Queer Eye on Racine and Corneille,” where the dependence on an impressive array of theoretical study, coupled to a lot of essential historical background and illustrated by non-mainstream texts, seems conceived and designed for the graduate school level. It depends to some extent on an analogy being accepted between Esther’s Jewishness or Polyeucte’s Christianity and the “closet stats” more immediately suggested by the word “queer.” Why use *Esther* when (as the essay suggests almost as an afterthought) you could plunge straight in with *Ph edre*? Benserade’s gender-bending *Iphis et Iante* is a fascinating text for this level of study, but it is not a tragedy, and invited comparison more obviously with *As You Like It* than with the other texts in the proposed syllabus.

The volume is commendably free from typographical inconsistencies and from slips. There is a rather unfortunate misprint in the French text of the “Songe d’Athalie” on p. 104, and a quotation correctly introduced as from *B er enice* on p. 137, is then attributed to *The Cid* in its reference. I am sure the different uses of single and double quotation marks had a rationale and were applied consistently, but I found it distracting when I noticed it; similarly, a decision to use a different font for “further resources” than is used for conventional bibliographies. I took a slightly mischievous pleasure in picking John Lyons up on one minor mistranslation: on p. 45 the conditional form “*r eagirait*” is an instance of its use to cast potential doubt on a reported fact (Grevisse, § 739, 1^o) and would be better translated as “controls” or “is supposed to control.” These few minor quibbles, however, pale into insignificance alongside the absence of an index, which greatly diminishes the practical value of the volume for its target audiences. An integrated bibliography would also be an improvement over the patchwork of “works cited” and “further reading.”

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Edward Forman, Professor Emeritus
University of Bristol
e.r.b.forman@btinternet.com

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