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Violaine Heryaud and Bernard Vouilloux, eds. *Relire* Cyrano de Bergerac. Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2021. 220 pp. Notes and index. €64.00 (hb). ISBN 9782406126409; €25.00 (pb). ISBN 9782406126393.

Review by Hervé Picherit, University of Texas at Austin.

The collection *Relire* Cyrano de Bergerac, edited by Violaine Heryaud and Bernard Vouilloux, revisits a wildly popular yet critically disregarded work, Edmond Rostand's theatrical masterpiece *Cyrano de Bergerac* (1897). Indeed, the editors might have simply called the collection "Lire Cyrano," since—as Vouilloux states in his introduction—*Cyrano* is much more often cited than it is analyzed. The essays gathered in *Relire* remedy this neglect, many of them using the play's unusual position between popular adulation and scholarly indifference as their starting point. Collectively, the authors of *Relire* address the cultural significance of a work whose defining feature might very well be its paradoxical ability to incite acclaim, opprobrium, and indifference in equal measure.

*Relire* achieves this task by reviving different aspects of *Cyrano's* creation and reception history. This critical work cuts against the apparently timeless success of Rostand's play with audiences, since *Cyrano's* very popularity has come to obscure the specific conditions of its production. *Relire* brings to bear the complex political, social, and cultural forces that in fact underpin the seeming simplicity of Rostand's play.

Here we find another of the collection's threads, since its authors—whether directly or implicitly—argue that *Cyrano's* reputation as a simple play is the sign of a deeper, far more complex achievement. After all, what is guileless about a historical play that speaks as much about the seventeenth century in which it is set, as the end of the nineteenth century in which it was composed? What is facile about a poetic work that simultaneously borrows from and pushes back against the baroque and the romantic sensibilities, not to speak of literary *préciosité* and French symbolism? In short, what is simple about a literary text that marshals the cultural and social networks of two distinct historical periods to reconcile the complexities and contradictions of the French Belle Époque? Acknowledging Rostand's virtuosity in achieving the appearance of simplicity, *Relire* works to reveal the hidden complexity of precisely those features of *Cyrano* that resist analysis. In doing so, the collection incites us to see past the play's reputation and gives us the tools to reread *Cyrano de Bergerac*, as though for the first time.

In their essays "La critique aboie, *Cyrano* remplit les salles': Fortune scénique de *Cyrano* et infortune académique de Rostand" and "Le lyrisme de la versification heureuse," Jeanyves Guérin

and Alain Vaillant address the paradox of *Cyrano's* success among audiences as the cause of Rostand's (relative) failure among critics. Central to Guérin's claim is the idea that success is a zero-sum game for *Cyrano*, inasmuch as the play's popular triumph hindered serious critical analysis of the work. Inversely, the play's popularity with audiences contributed to its reputation among critics as being of dubious merit. Guérin explains this phenomenon by re-situating *Cyrano* in the anti-romantic moment of its first performance, a context in which Rostand's success would have seemed conventional, if not entirely *dépassé*, to sophisticated critics who had moved beyond the romantic tropes that constitute a significant current in the play. *Cyrano* never quite outgrew the reputation of being an unsophisticated success, even if it was subject to changing literary fashions. Indeed, *Cyrano's* patriotic themes resonated well during the Great War, while the end of the Second World War saw the play's stock fall once more among critics.

For Vaillant, the same disparity between audiences and critics produced the strange situation where *Cyrano* emerged as a success, while Rostand never came to be considered as a real or serious poet. Vaillant argues that the critical ambivalence for *Cyrano* stems from Rostand's social class. Born into the *haute bourgeoisie*, Rostand was not part of the bohemian circle from which emerged France's more critically acclaimed poets. What's more, Rostand's very choice of the Théâtre de la Porte Saint-Martin for the play's premier echoes his class sensibility, since this theater catered to bourgeois audiences. It is in this light that Vaillant demonstrates how the apparent prosodic flaws of Rostand's writing were in fact self-conscious effects chosen by an author whose play is about poetry. The apparent poetic infelicities of *Cyrano* that marred Rostand's reputation (namely, his dismemberment of Alexandrine verses) were in fact intended as comedic effects, destined to entertain the bourgeois audiences of the Théâtre de la Porte Saint-Martin.

In their essays "Cyrano est-il français," "Une pièce baroque," and "Je l'attendrai debout, et l'épée à la main ! Réflexions sur la comédie héroïque," Clémence Caritté, Hélène Laplace-Claverie, and Sylvain Ledda examine Rostand's adoption and defiance of different generic conventions. Caritté illuminates the historical and political context of *Cyrano's* reception. Key to this analysis is *Cyrano's* involvement in a theatrical fashion of the period: the "military play." Caritté argues that we must understand the significance of *Cyrano's panache* as a reaction to the traumas of the Franco-Prussian war and the polarizing scandal of the Dreyfus Affair. The claim is all the more compelling given that the site of *Cyrano's* premier, the Théâtre de la Porte Saint-Martin, was a known venue for such military dramas. And while Caritté argues that the military play served to set a familiar horizon of expectation for *Cyrano's* audience, she also demonstrates how Rostand defied this theatrical fashion as much as it engaged with it. *Cyrano's* success, then, was the product of Rostand's ability to transcend the viewers' expectations of this fashionable sub-genre of theater.

In turn, Laplace-Claverie demonstrates that the baroque aesthetic is not merely a set-piece within *Cyrano's* diegesis, but also influences the extra-diegetic features of the play's style. However, Rostand's version of the baroque is heavily filtered by romanticism. In particular, Laplace-Claverie argues that Rostand discovered the historical figure of Cyrano in Théophile Gautier's collection of *médailles littéraires, Les Grottesques* (1856). The theatrical character of Cyrano is thus a heavily mediated figure who embodies a romantic vision of the baroque movement. Indeed, Laplace-Claverie shows that Rostand describes his protagonist using characteristically baroque tropes. And while the playwright borrows actively from the baroque, he does not let this aesthetic limit *Cyrano*, since Rostand conspicuously avoids many of this movement's most obvious figures.

Rostand's *coup de force* consists here in making the audience consider the baroque and romantic movements together, not as competing sensibilities, but as a hybrid way of being in the world.

Ledda considers the question of *Cyrano's* unusual generic designation as a *comédie héroïque*. He traces the genealogy of this genre to the Cornelian *tragi-comédie*, which he identifies as the source for another theatrical fashion of the late nineteenth century, namely the *comédie historique*. As with the military drama and the baroque, *Cyrano* breaks the conventions of the *comédie historique* as much as Rostand borrows from them, making his play stand out as the exception (and exceptional example) of this genre's rules.

In their essays "L'art de la pointe ou le poème aiguisé," "Un alexandrin de comédie," and "Interjections et onomatopées," Géraldine Vogel, Jean-Michel Gouvard, and Bertrand Degott turn to Rostand's work as a poet in the versification of his play in Alexandrine meter. Vogel's work examines Rostand's parallel engagement with poetic issues of the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries. Relying on the etymological meaning of *bretteur* (*faire*, to do), an epithet applied to *Cyrano* throughout the play, Vogel demonstrates how this hero embodies a seventeenth-century remedy to the nineteenth century's *mal du siècle*, the chronic inaction characterized by neurasthenia. Vogel sees in Rostand an heir to poetic symbolism, inasmuch as the playwright uses his own poetry, as well as his portrayal of *Cyrano's poiesis* through verse and action, to contest the fatalism of naturalism and poetic decadence.

Gouvard reevaluates critical disdain of Rostandian verse. He builds his claim on the fact that the Théâtre de la Porte Saint-Martin was known for showing plays that didn't follow the typical rules of prosody. As such, the apparent poetic flaws of *Cyrano's* Alexandrine verse were in fact intentional choices used for comedic effect. To illustrate the intentionality of these humorous infelicities, Gouvard provides an impressively extensive analysis of Rostand's wonky rhymes and stuffed lines in order to reveal the poetic complexity concealed behind the appearance of metric inelegance.

In his reading of the play, Degott studies Rostand's use of interjection and onomatopoeia. He takes the position that these utterances are not merely metric filler, but serve a vital dramatic function in the play. Rostandian interjection is a vital source of characterization, as different personages acquire their unique qualities according to the ways in which they punctuate their speech. More generally, Degott cites the emotive function of interjection and onomatopoeia to show how Rostand's generous use of these utterances gives the play a "natural" quality absent from more classical plays that tend to eschew such exclamations.

Henri Scepi, Bernard Vouilloux, and Jean-Marie Apostolidès consider the unique features of *Cyrano's* theatricality. In "Poétique du souffleur," Scepi examines the ways in which *Cyrano's* theatrical traits contain a sustained reflection on the status of poetry writ large. His argument relies principally on the image of the *souffleur* or prompter. Scepi takes this metaphor beyond the famous image of *Cyrano* whispering lines to Christian in order to argue that Rostand himself is a *souffleur* of poetic language. The unique function of the *souffleur poétique* is to speak the versified language of a theatrical text without playing a role in the play itself. More importantly, the *souffleur* brings together the poetry of many different texts. This is why this figure can utter the necessary line just before it is needed to hold together, not only the theatrical illusion, but the fabric of poetic language in general. It is as a *souffleur*, then, that Rostand weaves together strands

of French poetry of both the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries in order to participate in the poetic debates of his time.

In “Le théâtre du geste,” Vouilloux examines the important role Rostand played in staging his own productions of *Cyrano*. In particular, he argues that we must understand the play as part of a revolution of *mise-en-scène* that began in the 1870s. Vouilloux relies on the reminiscences of the first actor to embody Cyrano, Benoît-Constant Coquelin, who testifies to the great effort Rostand put into staging the play. Vouilloux extends the metaphor of the “play within the play,” which launches *Cyrano* (the titular character must interrupt a diegetic production of Balthazar Baro’s *La Clorise* (1632) before Rostand’s own play can begin in earnest), to argue that Rostand’s staging makes *Cyrano* a play about theater. The *mise-en-scène* was such that all the characters say what they do, and do what they say. This staging in effect doubles the play’s theatricality, since the actors’ gestures scenically reiterate the poetic attributes of Rostand’s versification.

In his “Paradoxe sur le *Cyrano*,” Apostolidès builds his argument around the unique association of the actor Coquelin and the character Cyrano. Apostolidès argues that this bond between actor and character represents a break in Coquelin’s usually “distanced” acting style. Instead, the actor fully and uncharacteristically inhabits the personage of Cyrano. This is because, Apostolidès argues, the playwright based the character of Cyrano not so much on Coquelin as on another *monstre sacré* of theater: Sarah Bernhardt. It is through this complex process—Coquelin playing a character who evokes the acting style of Bernhardt—that *Cyrano* transcends a purely theatrical function to take on a role more akin to a spiritual or religious experience. Indeed, Apostolidès asserts that Cyrano’s presence on stage mirrors the manor of a Siberian shaman. This shamanistic stance functions as a remedy for the de-symbolization of society. Whether within the diegesis, where Cyrano counters the ornate meaninglessness of *langage précieux*, or taken extra-diegetically where Rostand’s play rebuts the nineteenth-century version of the same symbolic crisis, *Cyrano* accomplishes a re-symbolization of reality.

Jean Bourgeois and Fabrice Wilhelm address thematic elements that contribute to *Cyrano*’s complexity in their essays “Le système des personnages féminins” and “Nez postiche et imposture: Cyrano, une ‘exception.’” Bourgeois reads against the dearth of female characters in *Cyrano* to demonstrate that those few women who do populate Rostand’s play belong to legible categories that function together as a unified system. To do so, Bourgeois identifies three main groups of female characters: nurturing, religious, and *précieuse* women. This division allows Bourgeois to demonstrate how Roxane comes to embody all of these characteristics throughout the play, such that she unites all versions of femininity that interest Rostand. This view also reveals the ways in which the apparently minor character of Lise Ragueneau represents an “anti-Roxane” who inverts all the positive traits borne by the heroine.

Wilhelm in turn adopts Cyrano’s infamous nose as a cypher to help decode Rostand’s subtle statements on social standing and mobility. Wilhelm begins by distinguishing imposture from lying, identifying the former as a mechanism for social ascent. It is imposture that allows its practitioner to attain an otherwise inaccessible social identity. Within Rostand’s play, we can understand the importance of imposture in light of Cyrano’s recent ennoblement: the hero’s grotesquely large nose imitates the nobility of the famously ample *nez bourbon*. As such, the actor’s false nose functions as a sign of the character’s successful appropriation of a status otherwise beyond his reach. Recently promoted to the lowest rung of the aristocracy, Cyrano’s impostures allow him to mirror the uniquely noble traits of the monarch.

*Relire* will serve as a foundational text for scholars interested in Rostand's oeuvre. It is also an important book for critics interested in the social and cultural forces that shaped French theater at the end of the nineteenth century. More broadly, *Relire* stands out for the way in which it opens doors. This collection does not only convincingly argue for a new, more serious phase in research on Rostand's masterwork. *Relire* goes on to offer a broad sampling of the very compelling work produced when critics take seriously the success and (apparent) simplicity of *Cyrano de Bergerac*. The reader leaves *Relire* with many new insights into the play, Rostand, and *Belle Époque* theater. More importantly, one comes away from the book with anticipation about the future when other critics will join the contributors of the collection in taking seriously this often cited, but rarely analyzed work of French literature.

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