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Caroline Labrune, *Fictions dramatiques et succession monarchique (1637-1691)*. Lumière classique 120. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2021. 568 pp. Notes, appendix, bibliography, and index nominum. €70.00 (pb). ISBN 978-2-7453-5543-0.

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In seventeenth-century France, many writers of serious drama were repeatedly interested in the political and emotional turmoil of monarchical succession. In this study, Caroline Labrune asks whether these dramatists, working under a monarchy, were merely playing with fire, or whether they were stoking it to the point of subversion. Responses to this compelling question are deferred to the closing part of the book, as Labrune first provides a comprehensive taxonomy of types of monarchical succession crises in ninety-nine examples of seventeenth-century serious drama, under which category she includes tragedy, tragicomedy, and *comédie héroïque*.

The first section of the four-part book, “Cadres,” outlines the areas in which the seventeenth-century French theater world and the royal court encountered each other, as well as the theoretical and legal frameworks in which French monarchical succession was defined. Dramatists were kept in check by the presence of courtiers in Parisian theater spaces, by systems of control and censorship in the publishing industry, and by the patronage structures underlying the cultural policies set up by Richelieu and sustained by Jean-Baptiste Colbert. Pointing out that many dramatists of the time had legal training, Labrune moves on to the *loix fondamentales du royaume de France*, with a particular focus on the fiction of the king's two bodies expounded in the ceremonial school of the historian Ernst Kantorowicz.[1] The book would at this point benefit from some cross-referencing to indicate that the theory will be taken up again in a detailed analysis of Jean Racine's *Bérénice*, (1670) in “Types de la crise de succession,” (part II, chapter 5). Labrune provides fascinating insights into the legal discourses used to articulate the ideals of a smooth monarchical succession in seventeenth-century France. It would have been helpful, however, to point out earlier in the discussion that these legal discourses do not map directly onto most of the corpus examples, since only a few of the plays take French history as their source. Instead, dramatists usually looked to classical myth, ancient history, often Roman imperial history, and late antiquity. Some turned to medieval Spain or Tudor England. Other sources from early modern history were geographically distant; for example, the Ottoman Empire provided material for several plays.

In the second part, “Crises,” Labrune builds on Étienne Souriau's concept of the “situation dramatique” to ask why playwrights so often presented succession crises (pp. 105-106).[2] Labrune argues that the mismatch between seventeenth-century theorists' ideals and the content

of the plays cannot be explained by the fact that the writers looked far beyond recent French history for dramatic *sujets*. Instead, playwrights rejected the “mystique monarchique,” a term adapted from Marc Bloch’s notion of “la royauté mystique”, to signify the system of “représentations qui font de la royauté l’objet d’une dévotion irrationnelle et du roi un individu dont l’autorité a une source surnaturelle et énigmatique” (p. 75).^[3]

The first half of part two outlines the ways in which dramatists distanced divinities from the human wrangling over succession and underplayed the mystical qualities of majesty. This discussion opens the way for an exploration of the corpus in relation to the limits of “une pragmatique de la succession monarchique,” the often unachievable ideal of immediate succession, the instability of interregna, different claims of legitimacy, the constraints of law, the strength of the *vox populi*, and the role of the military (pp. 141-180). The second half of part two focuses on the different forms that succession crises took in seventeenth-century French drama, making a distinction between complex crises that involve several pretenders to the throne (representing most of the study’s corpus), and simple crises that involve only one pretender. The former category encompasses episodes of open conflict, conspiracy, and cabals. The latter category includes scenarios in which the lone pretender must prove his worth and other examples in which the reigning ruler contemplates the destruction of the monarchical system. Each subsection of part two includes a helpful opening footnote listing the relevant plays from the study’s corpus. Labrune identifies Racine’s *Bérénice* as an exception to the rule that seventeenth-century French drama dealing with succession deals also with crisis. The author claims that the early modern legal fiction of the king’s two bodies and the mystical majesty of the sovereign are projected onto Titus and used as dramatic devices; in this way, Racine’s play does not present a “crise de succession,” but rather a “crise de conscience” of the emperor (pp. 213-220). The case study of *Bérénice* includes masterful close readings of grammatical features to show how seventeenth-century French dynastic theory is echoed in the language of Racine’s verse.

The third part, “Histoires de vie et de mort,” looks more closely at the relationship between the theme of monarchical succession and the theory and practice of seventeenth-century French dramaturgy. The first chapter in this part explores the violence occasioned and evoked by the dramatic representation of succession crises, quantifying the number of characters who die in the plays and how death befalls them. The quantification is tempered by close literary analysis of citations from Jean Galbert de Campistron’s *Andronic* (1685) and Jean Mairet’s *Bajazet* (1639). Labrune then investigates the motivating factors of the violent acts, identifying the two main catalysts as personal ambition and amorous passions. The following chapter outlines instances when it is more politically savvy to preserve the life of a pretender to the throne, though the threat of death pervades many plays, not least because it heightens dramatic tension. Labrune points to examples where blood ties, as well as pragmatic decisions, may occasion the salvation of characters. The author makes a special case study of clemency though an analysis of Pierre Corneille’s *Cinna* (1643).

The last chapter of this part, “Sublimes en situation,” introduces some seventeenth-century dramatic theory as it considers the emotional effects elicited by staged succession crises. The introduction of dramatic theory at this late stage in a book on “fictions dramatiques” seems counterintuitive but is explained by the preceding heavy focus on contextual legal fictions regarding monarchical succession. Drawing on the classical treatise *On the Sublime*, translated into French by Nicolas Boileau in 1674, Labrune explains that the plays under analysis “impriment au cœur du spectateur un sentiment fort, voire extrême, de vertige” (p. 307).^[4]

Given that most of the corpus is tragedy it is unsurprising that the “sublime de la pitié” should be set in action most frequently; indeed, as Racine famously asserted in the preface to *Bérénice*, this pity need not always be the result of death (pp. 309-320). Labrune addresses fear, the other key feature of Aristotelian audience response, within the encompassing term “sublime d’étonnement” to demonstrate that staged succession crises can evoke a mix of emotions ranging from pity to fear to admiration (pp. 320-340). However, the author does argue that this mixture of pity and fear is principally a feature of tragedy, whereas tragicomedy predominantly tends to evoke fear, and *comédie héroïque*, admiration. This observation perhaps undermines the suggestion that succession crises in themselves held an especially diverse dramatic power over seventeenth-century audiences. While the acknowledgement of genre differences is helpful, the categorization of emotional response is possibly too neat.

In the fourth and final part of the book, Labrune takes up the question of how subversive the plays were. For the majority of her corpus of serious drama, the author follows Madeleine Bertaud’s assertion that seventeenth-century tragedy could not be described as “littérature engagée,” and was principally an “art de divertissement” rather than a vehicle of political activism (p. 487).^[5] Labrune points out that most plays end with a return to monarchical order, and even plays that presented shocking executions of legitimate sovereigns were likely to inspire horror for regicide rather than a subversive call for emulation. Nevertheless, Labrune claims there is room to argue for limited, though ultimately neutralized, elements of subversion in six plays from her corpus: Savinien de Cyrano de Bergerac’s *La Mort d’Agrippine* (1654), Claude Du Bosc de Montandré’s *L’Adieu du trône* (1654), Gabriel Gilbert’s *Sémiramis* (1647), Jean Le Royer Prade’s *Arsace, roi des Parthes* (1666), Pierre Corneille’s *Pulchérie* (1673), and Pierre Du Ryer’s *Nitocris, reine de Babylone* (1650). Labrune argues that seventeenth-century French drama succeeded in posing difficult political questions without converting them into lessons.

In dealing with a considerable number of texts, it is sensible to avoid too many allusions to plays beyond the defined corpus, but the rationale behind inclusion and exclusion of plays in this study’s corpus is not always clear. One example is the omission of Gauthier de Costes, seigneur de La Calprenède’s *Le Comte d’Essex* (first printed 1639). Lack of precise information about its first performance may have ruled it just outside the work’s date range, but its complete absence is all the more surprising since one section on calumny as conspiracy directly compares La Calprenède’s *La Mort des enfants d’Hérode* (1639) with “les Comtes d’Essex de [Claude] Boyer and de Thomas Corneille” (p. 200). I was expecting at least a footnote to explain why La Calprenède’s earlier version of the Essex story had been excluded (his other Tudor-inspired play, *Jeanne, reine d’Angleterre*, is discussed elsewhere in the volume). Indeed, any reader wanting to look up a particular play is done a disservice by the *index nominum*, which would have benefited from the listing of plays under writers’ names. Instead, the reader must rely on the heavily subdivided table of contents, which includes intriguing thematic subheadings but only a few references to specific plays where they represent exceptional cases in the corpus.

These referencing issues notwithstanding, this erudite study is a welcome addition to scholarship on the interaction between politics and seventeenth-century French drama. It would be interesting to read the text in dialogue with Ruoting Ding’s *L’usurpation du pouvoir dans le théâtre français, 1636-1691*.^[6] The idea that the boundary between poetics and politics is indistinct in seventeenth-century French tragic drama has been explored in works such as Katherine Ibbett’s *The Style of the State in French Theater, 1630-1660*.^[7] Labrune contributes to this perspective

through careful close analyses of citations from the plays. The extensive corpus under investigation necessarily circumscribes the scope for such analysis, but students and researchers alike can benefit from the fragments that are carefully embedded in an exhaustive comparative examination of an impressive range of succession plays.

NOTES

[1] Ernst Kantorowicz, *The King's Two Bodies: A Study in Medieval Political Theology* (Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 2016 [1957]).

[2] Étienne Souriau, *Les Deux cent mille situations dramatiques* (Paris: Flammarion, 1950).

[3] Marc Bloch, *Les Rois thaumaturges, Étude sur le caractère surnaturel attribué à la puissance royale particulièrement en France et en Angleterre* (Paris, Gallimard, 1983 [1924]).

[4] Pseudo-Longin, *Traité du Sublime*, trans. Nicolas Boileau, ed. Francis Goyet (Paris: Le Livre de Poche, 1995).

[5] Madeleine Bertaud, “La tragédie à l’Âge classique pouvait-elle être une tribune politique? Réflexions sur quelques personnages de tyran,” in Sabine Gruffat and Olivier Leplatre, eds., *Discours politique et genres littéraires (XVIe-XVIIe siècles)* Cahiers du GADGES n. 6 (Geneva: Droz, 2008), 245-258.

[6] Ruoting Ding, *L’usurpation du pouvoir dans le théâtre français, 1636-1691* (Paris: Champion, 2021).

[7] Katherine Ibbett, *The Style of the State in French Theater, 1630-1660: Neoclassicism and Government* (Farnham and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2009).

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