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Ruoting Ding, *L'Usurpation du pouvoir dans le théâtre français du XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle (1636-1696)*. Paris: Honoré Champion, 2021. 559 pp. Bibliography and index. €75.00. ISBN 9-78-2745355270.

Review by Perry Gethner, Oklahoma State University.

This thoughtful monograph examines a corpus of 100 plays from the mid and latter parts of the French seventeenth century, consisting mostly of tragedies, but also of tragicomedies and *comédies héroïques*, where political perturbations involving dynastic succession play a major role. The term “usurpation” in the title is taken in a very broad sense, to cover multiple scenarios where there is questioning of or threats to royal legitimacy. The methodology, primarily based on Georges Forestier’s *critique génétique*, also incorporates features from other contemporary approaches, thus emphasizing the interplay between dramaturgy and ideology.<sup>[1]</sup> Although there is some discussion of how the playwrights’ approach to these topics changed over the course of the century, the book is organized around structural and typological questions, rather than chronology. It is divided into three main sections, each focused on one of the three underlying theoretical issues: right to rule, duty to rule, and will to rule. Ding regularly cites relevant passages from French jurists, political theorists, and philosophers to explain what the accepted norms were in France. As she notes, even if playwrights and audiences did not know those texts firsthand, they had absorbed their main principles, especially male primogeniture, the inalienability and indivisibility of the crown, the absoluteness of sovereignty, and the Salic Law.

Ding’s analysis is primarily centered on the impact of the *bienséances* and *vraisemblance* on the playwrights’ calculation about whether they could show situations that would have been deemed unthinkable or unacceptable according to accepted French norms about monarchical rule. This helps to explain the preference for setting plays in countries where the norms regarding succession were radically different from those in France, especially Persia and Turkey (where no royal prince had a guaranteed right of succession), the Roman Empire (where emperors could adopt a successor in place of their biological sons), and England (where women could rule). Scenarios involving abdication or proposed abdication by a king, questions about who the legitimate successor is (son by blood versus son by adoption, twin sons), or crown princes who might appear disqualified (due to criminality, illegitimacy, or being born prior to the father’s accession to the throne), all allow exploration of exciting situations where one of the protagonists can inspire pity or fear in French audiences, who could still feel reassured that such situations would be impossible in their own land. Playwrights sometimes modified the historical facts to make the parties in the conflict more or less sympathetic by French standards.

Conflicts between fathers and sons, where the king disinherits or executes his heir, or threatens to do so, lead to two simultaneous violations of French norms: kings are not allowed to modify basic rules such as succession, yet crown princes seeking to assert their legitimate claim by staging a revolt become guilty of *lèse-majesté*. Such conflicts are typically the result of palace intrigue, generated by second wives, royal mistresses, or corrupt ministers. Friction between fathers and sons, who originally feel affection for one another, may also arise from rivalry in love or from the slander of the innocent prince by a villain. Ding argues that playwrights avoided certain scenarios, such as violent conflicts between royal brothers in Turkey, where no primogeniture rule existed, because French audiences would not sympathize with the claimants, both of whom were devoid of legal right. In plays where brothers do clash, political motives are also linked to rivalry in love. In Ding's view, the fact that most plays in this group show a perfidious older brother pitted against a virtuous, law-abiding and *galant* younger brother does not indicate a subtle attack on primogeniture, but rather constitutes a dramaturgical choice used to justify the treatment of interfamily opposition. A more complex questioning of legitimacy occurs in plays treating the conflict, unthinkable for the French, between Rome and its allies, where kings with reduced geopolitical influence must decide whether the notion of sovereignty means trying to preserve their national autonomy or accepting Rome as the real source of authority. In one of the few areas where Ding sees chronology as impacting dramaturgy, she notes that playwrights active after the Fronde, unlike their colleagues of the previous generation, were careful to avoid showing rebellious princes; instead, princes remain loyal to the king, while most kings are shown as just and sometimes magnanimous.

Playwrights featuring kings who lose their power needed to take special precautions. Executions of already dethroned monarchs (in England) are presented as shocking, but such plays allow judgment scenes where "reason of state" questions can be debated, while emphasizing the courage and nobility of the ex-ruler, often presented as the victim of injustice. Dethroned kings who are willing to cede power to a virtuous usurper ultimately regain their rightful place. Kings who consider abdication for selfish reasons are presented as poor role models, though usually they maintain their royal dignity.

The section on duty to rule is fascinating because, as Ding demonstrates, the clash between the love interest and the dynastic interest allows the combining of internal and external obstacles to the protagonists' desires. Plays featuring reigning queens, exploiting the un-French scenario of gynococracy, show the queen feeling an obligation either to marry (to fulfill the terms of a treaty or will, or because the subjects demand a male ruler) or to remain single (in order to avoid diluting her power). Their dilemmas may be further complicated by sentimental factors (jealousy, pride), by political concerns (fear of misalliance if her beloved is of lower rank), or by outside pressures (plotting by a would-be usurper). Misalliances, usually with a valiant and devoted favorite, are sometimes allowed in tragicomedies, where the requirement of a happy ending takes precedence over normal political reality. Most of these plays were composed during the regency of Anne of Austria, although Ding points out that, even if current events furnished a source of inspiration, none of these plays directly reflects real life; besides, a few of them were written decades later.

In the case of princes who are legitimate heirs to the throne, though they may be unaware of their real identity until well into the play, their passion keeps them from striving to assume their rightful role. Ding argues that the so-called *tragédies galantes* retain key elements of tragicomedy, especially the fact that the heroes are essentially devoid of ambition and thus must be pushed into

reclaiming the throne when crucial secrets (such as babies switched in infancy) are revealed to them; the political crisis is a mere backdrop for the love plot, and the heroes, who experience no real internal conflict, are not genuinely tragic figures. She suggests that this type of play, arising when authors of tragicomedies needed to achieve greater unity of plot in order to observe the newly-established rules and using dynastic crisis as the preferred mechanism, constituted a point where the barriers between the intermediate genre and tragedy started to break down. But these plays soon fell out of favor because the heroes were too passive and lacked psychological depth.

Playwrights also experimented with making the usurper the protagonist, including a few cases where the usurper is innocent (forced into the role by a parent) and capable. As the century progressed, they became increasingly wary of killing off usurpers, as the belief that anyone who was crowned deserved respect came to counterbalance arguments justifying tyrannicide. Thus, usurpers who are essentially virtuous are spared and the legitimate heir may marry their daughter, while those who are wicked die, often by suicide, and rarely by the hand of the legitimate prince. There was even greater reluctance to show the removal of *tyrans d'exercice* (legitimate rulers who abuse their power or are inept). Leaving aside cases of evil kings murdered through private revenge (and in some cases the playwrights turn the tyrant into a usurper, thus attenuating the scandalous action), the few plays where unworthy kings are deposed by a capable subject include much talk of unconditional loyalty, and those works, composed by amateurs living in the provinces, were not intended for public performance. In some cases, the virtuous hero who is persecuted by a tyrant but maintains his loyalty achieves tragic status precisely through the duty of obedience. Justice, if it happens at all, must come through an act of divine Providence.

The section on will to reign is mainly devoted to conspiracy plays. The key dramaturgical problems are the degree to which the person seeking to overthrow a monarch can be properly considered heroic and/or tragic, whether the imperiled monarch could be viewed as the real hero, and how audiences with absolutist sympathies would react to a play in which the system of monarchy is itself challenged. Tragedies showing conspiracies designed to reestablish a republican or egalitarian regime, limited to a brief period (roughly 1635-1645), grant some heroic qualities to the conspirators while clearly siding ideologically with the monarch. Tragedies centering around wicked conspirators make the protagonists relatable by focusing on the intensity of the passion motivating their actions (ambition, lust, desire to put a child on the throne). The plotters may even inspire sympathy when they repent *in extremis*. Virtuous plotters who fail are rare. The best-known examples are in Racine, who presents two young and inexperienced princes maneuvered into a conspiracy when their lives are threatened, only to find themselves pawns in a larger political game dominated by amoral people. Playwrights are careful to reestablish stability and legitimacy at the end, even though the victims may inspire pity. The one exception comes from Cyrano, whose conspiracy tragedy presents no admirable main characters and subverts all the fundamental values: moral and religious, as well as political.

The final chapter deals with plays whose protagonists find their desire to rule impeded. Ding argues that although such plays share some basic ingredients, such as targeting a single individual to be eliminated (or wed), secrecy, and lack of solidarity among plotters, they do not form a coherent subgenre. That view is contrary to the position of several earlier scholars. Certain techniques of plotting, such as slander designed to discredit a rival, can only function as episodes, since to make them central would turn the play into merely the hateful persecution of an innocent by scoundrels. The virtuous hero can transcend victimhood and achieve tragic status by being placed in a situation where the means to gain the throne would require him to act in a

way that is unethical or undignified, and since he usually chooses to preserve his purity, he must either die or be installed through a conspiracy in which he plays little or no role. Some of these plays revolve around hidden identities, but a hero who lacks legitimacy through birth is not allowed to prevail, even if he genuinely possesses kingly qualities and identifies with the role. Of the dramatists who explore the *être/paraître* dichotomy with regard to royal status, Corneille seems the most convinced that the two are basically inseparable. Boyer presents the possibility of winning status through merit as a temporary scenario that creates admiration even if it must be ultimately exploded. Racine, who views aspiration toward rulership as impure, presents virtuous heroes who are powerless and often fully aware of it.

In the conclusion Ding notes that, although there were major shifts in political theory since the Middle Ages (especially the increasing importance accorded to *raison d'État*, dissimulation, and the transformation of prudence from a moral to a pragmatic category), these changes had minimal impact on the French playwrights' depiction of royal legitimacy. Good rulers are regularly presented as committed to moral standards and almost never resort to ruse or disguise unless their lives are threatened. When it comes to taking action in order to gain or regain the throne to which they are properly entitled, they either act openly or prefer inaction, in which they can prevail only if Providence acts on their behalf by having the usurper removed without their involvement. In order to inspire pathos for a nearly perfect hero, playwrights need to show his admirable reactions to the crises with which he is confronted (such as persecution, calumny, or problematic love attachment), or have him decide to employ morally questionable tactics, which sully his virtue. Audiences preferred to see monarchy depicted in a glorious light both for aesthetic reasons (the task of art is to show life as it ought to be) and for political and ideological reasons. However, those considerations could sometimes conflict, and the inevitable mingling of historical and fictional elements within a dramatic plot, allowing for challenges to French-style absolutism, could lead to serious reflections on accepted values that ultimately did not challenge them.

This book makes a significant contribution to the study of early modern French drama, but it is a challenge to read all the way through, given the huge number of plays discussed, many of them unfamiliar, and given the quantity and variety of sources from other disciplines that are examined, often with very lengthy quotations. However, Ding's solid research and carefully nuanced analyses make her work a valuable source for reference.

#### NOTE

[1] For the best explanation of the methodology, see George Forestier, *Essai de génétique théâtrale: Corneille à l'oeuvre* (Paris: Klincksieck, 1996).

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