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Marcie Ray, *Coquettes, Wives, and Widows: Gender Politics in French Baroque Opera and Theater*. Rochester, N.Y.: Rochester University Press, 2020. xi + 191 pp. Appendix, notes, bibliography, index. \$90.00 U.S. (hb). ISBN 9781580469883; \$29.95 U.S. (eb). ISBN 9781787449008.

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Coquettes, Wives, and Widows, a volume whose text and notes occupy 158 pages, sets out to fill the void of feminist criticism on “French Baroque Opera and Theater,” as its title puts it. The book covers operas and comic theater in the period 1701 to 1745, focusing on parallels between the legal and social status of women during the period and analysis of the treatment of particular character types in selected theatrical pieces. The rationale for this approach relates to the main thesis of the book, set out in the introduction: to “argue that early to mid-eighteenth-century French comedies and musical spectacles about love rewrite the progressive themes that emerged from the salon fifty years before” (p. 2). While that is certainly a worthy aim, this book misses that mark by several yards, despite being stylistically quite well-written. Its problems begin with its basic design. The book focuses on case studies of four female character types, largely in particular theatrical pieces, rather than attempting to treat the representation of these character types in a systematic way. Even with that limitation there would be plenty to say, but unfortunately, a host of basic methodological and organizational problems mar what could have been a very interesting study. Indeed, discussion of the source of the “progressive themes” promised in the introduction, novels by Madeleine de Scudéry and Madame de Lafayette, does not arrive until the last chapter, making for a difficult appreciation of this central theme of the book.

The four chapters each deal with a particular character type and its social roots in early modern French society: the coquette (chapter one), the widow (chapter two), the divorcee (chapter three), and the woman “indifferent” to love (chapter four). The methodological problems assert themselves in the choice of repertoire, which not only compares generic apples with oranges, but involves pieces, particularly the operas, that are both unique and highly problematic. The coquette is illustrated via Jean-Philippe Rameau’s *Platée* (1745); the widow by selected pieces for the Comédie-Française, the Comédie-Italienne, and the Théâtres de la foire (later known as the Opéra-comique); the divorcee by three different productions at the Opéra-comique; and the indifferent by André Campra’s and Antoine Danchet’s opera-ballet, *Aréthuse, ou la vengeance de l’Amour* (1701).

As Ray acknowledges, there is certainly no shortage of theater pieces from the period in which these character types appear, but the book does not explain nor offer any rationale as to why

these particular pieces were chosen and others were not. Descriptions of dramatic or musical characteristics are often footnoted with citations of other plays, making it clear that there is considerable bibliographic work behind the assertions, but Ray never states exactly how common such works were, nor does she discuss them in detail. This raises a number of questions that a purely hermeneutic methodology cannot answer. To what extent do the characterizations reflect general stereotypes, approaches, or ideologies as opposed to the views of the particular authors, impresarios, or audiences for the productions in question?

The problem of the plays' ideological address to audiences of particular classes crops up on numerous occasions in the book, with contradictory statements from the author.^[1] To mediate this problem, Ray attempts to make a further general claim about the historical and institutional context, distinguishing the treatment of women characters in the different genres of plays at different theaters: "the *commedia dell'arte*-inspired repertoires at the Théâtres de la foire and the Comédie-Italienne tended to explore women's roles more sympathetically than those at the Opéra and the Comédie-Française" because "theaters under the careful surveillance of absolutist machinery—including the Opéra, the Comédie-Française, and, to a lesser degree, the Comédie-Italienne—would be expected to affirm [male] authority... whereas audiences could expect to find depictions of a *monde renversé*... at the théâtres de la foire, whose artistic productions received no subventions" (p. 9). While there is probably some truth to this assertion, the only proof the book offers is the analysis of the works chosen. There is little reference to theater history, nor to its extensive literature. For example, the topic of the *monde renversé* and Italian comic scenes appear at the Opéra during this period, most prominently in ballets, a point made forcefully by Georgia Cowart, who is even cited several times in the book, and discussed in detail by Rebecca Harris-Warrick, whose work is not.^[2] Thus, the book's generalizing arguments fall flat, and the it would have benefitted considerably not only from references to the literature on theatrical history, but also from some basic statistical analysis: how many plays at the fair theaters, for example, dealt with widows, and of those, how many treated them sympathetically vs. contemporary plays in other theaters?

The greatest strengths of the book are its parallels between the legal and social status of women during the period, culled largely, but not entirely, from secondary sources, and their representation on the stage, in addition to analysis of plays from the Théâtres de la foire, a little-studied repertory, that makes up the two central chapters. Not only do these chapters, and particularly chapter three, discuss and compare multiple different productions (rather than a single theater piece), but the social parallels in such comedies are clearer because the characters involved are representations of contemporary women with which the audience would have been familiar (albeit with comic exaggeration, a point Ray acknowledges). Furthermore, the tradition of the *commedia dell'arte*, on which the fair theaters drew, left a clear imprint on the roles played by female characters, as Ray claims in her introduction. Ray makes this point clearly in chapter three via a short discussion of Jean-François Regnard's comedy *Le Divorce*, performed at the Comédie-Italienne in 1688, in which an aristocratic wife successfully leaves her difficult husband via the help of the *lazzi*, who make fun of him. Ray then compares this to the plots—and the use of musical timbres—of three later productions at the Fair Theaters.

By contrast, the treatment of two opera productions in the first and last chapters are highly problematic, not only because they deal only with a single opera but because neither of the two works chosen was in any way typical. The plots and character types in the repertoires of theaters was directly related to the genres associated with each theater and their literary sources, *tragédies*

en musique being largely mythological or chivalric, and ballets being varied but largely based on contemporary topics, a basic distinction Ray never mentions. Thus, Ray's choices of two atypical operas makes any generalization of her conclusions difficult. *Platée* is by far Rameau's most generically complex and problematic opera, for which a new designation, "ballet bouffon," had to be invented. Its comic plot was based on a mix of elements from *tragédies en musique*, comic opera, and elements drawn from Aristophanes's *The Frogs*.^[3] *Aréthuse*, an opéra-ballet, is likewise unusual because of its classical mythological origins, its antique (rather than modern) setting, and its through-going plot (rather than separate plots for each act).

Ray's discussions of the operas themselves are likewise problematic. They do not take the existing literature fully into account (at their peril), and they overgeneralize and stretch their interpretations by misattributing historical details. In the case of *Platée*, the problematic central character seems a strange choice for the representation of the coquette, as the title role is exceptional: a frog queen of the marshes incarnated by a male *haute-contre* singer. The plot is also unusual in its antique comic setting, stimulated by a jest on the part of the god Jupiter who wants to embarrass his jealous wife Juno by making her think he is interested in *Platée*. *Platée*'s vanity allows her to convince herself that Jupiter wishes to marry her, only to be mocked by everyone at the end of the opera. Ray asserts that the opera responded to critiques of social-climbing women not only in plays following *Platée*—a very interesting point unfortunately illustrated only by a footnote containing a long list of plays featuring coquettes—but most particularly as a reflection of criticisms of a real social climber: Jeanne Antoinette Poisson, Madame de Pompadour, a non-aristocrat who became the mistress of Louis XV. The argument runs into trouble in invoking the work's context. Ray claims that "since Rameau composed this comic ballet specifically for the royal wedding [of the Dauphin], he indulged aristocratic sensibilities, reviving older satires of salon women" (p. 23). However, the work was in fact not composed for the wedding but rather added to the celebrations at the last minute when the planned opera was not completed in time.^[4] Furthermore, at that point Poisson had only just become the king's mistress and was not yet the infamous figure she would later become. Thus, she was almost certainly not Rameau's or his librettists' intended model. Similarly, Ray's claim that *Platée* reflects a critique of salon traditions in which "all members of the salon—men, women, newly ennobled, and old nobility—be treated as equals" (p. 17) is an idea that has been prominently problematized via the work of Antoine Lilti on the social history of salons, which goes unmentioned.^[5]

The last chapter on *Aréthuse* finally deals with the promised topic of salon literature in more detail as the touchstone of women's writing that "offered a space for aristocratic women to imagine...what life would be like...if they could make their own decisions" (p. 81). The chapter also includes brief discussions of the reactions against women writers and the punishment of "indifferent women" characters in earlier theatrical productions. Ray herself points out that the "resistant heroines" of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* were a favorite source for Lully's and Quinault's plots (p. 88), and they make obvious candidates for a discussion of the abusive treatment of women in literature of the period. At the same time, this begs the question of how *Aréthuse* stands for more general trends in operatic, not to mention theatrical, representations of "indifferent women" in the post-Lully period the book aims to cover. This question is never really answered, as there is little consideration of literary or theatrical historical connections (or lack thereof) between the salon literature and the different operatic forms of the period. It is not as if Ray did not have models for such a study. The work of Patricia Howard, cited by Ray, not only traces Quinault's connections to the so-called "Précieuses," but explores the problem of "précieuse"

ideology and its expression in Quinault's work not only in terms of two character types--the prude (Ray's "indifferent") and the coquette (a point not mentioned in Ray's discussion of *Platée*)--but its influence on particular monologue scenes in the operas.[6] Furthermore, since the main characters in *Aréthuse* had already been featured on the stage of the Opéra in Lully's *Proserpine* (1680), it is not clear how Camppra's opera was somehow characteristic of the treatment of women characters in eighteenth-century opera in comparison to that of earlier productions.[6] Since this particular opera was based on a classical source like most *tragédies en musique* and unlike most ballets, the basis of its presentation of female characters depended as least as much on Ovid as on eighteenth-century social ideals or a reaction against salon culture. However, the book leaves its readers in the dark about how the ideological relationship between the antique and the contemporary might have functioned in such cases, merely asserting without further evidence that such reluctant heroines served "as allegories for modern resistant women" (p. 89).

Ultimately then, the book's methodological flaws overwhelm its attempts to prove its basic theses. At the same time, its feminist readings of individual plays and operas--and particularly the issues relating to contemporaneous female characters in productions that took their basis from commedia dell'arte plots--can serve as fodder for further and more in-depth exploration of the relationships between the social roles of women and their theatrical representations in early modern France. There has been considerable work on this area in the realm of Italian opera, and it is more than high time that musicologists built upon Howard's study of Quinault's and Lully's operas, which was published in 1991.[7]

NOTES

[1] E.g., p. 63: "The narrative arc for women seeking separations took different paths, depending on the ideological orientation of and expected audience for each theater."

[2] Georgia Cowart, *The Triumph of Pleasure: Louis XIV and the Politics of Spectacle* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), and Georgia Cowart, "Carnival in Venice or Protest in Paris? Louis XIV and the Politics of Subversion at the Paris Opéra," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 54/2 (2001): 265-302; Rebecca Harris-Warrick, *Dance and Drama in French Baroque Opera: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

[3] On the literary background and creation of the opera, see Downing A. Thomas, "Rameau's *Platée* Returns: A Case of Double Identity in the *Querelle des bouffons*," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 18/1 (2006): 1-19, and Robert A. Green, "Aristophanes, Rameau, and *Platée*," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 23/1 (2012): 1-26. The latter is neither discussed nor cited in the book.

[4] See Sylvie Bouissou, *Jean-Philippe Rameau, musicien des Lumières* (Paris: Fayard, 2014), pp. 591-592. For a different view of the negative role of women in *Platée*, not mentioned by Ray, see Georgia Cowart, "Of Women, Sex, and Folly: Opera Under the Old Regime," *Cambridge Opera Journal* 6/3 (November 1994): 218-220.

[4] *Le monde des salons : Sociabilité et mondanité à Paris au XVIII^e siècle* (Paris: Fayard, 2005).

[5] "The Influence of the *Précieuses* on the Content and Structure of Quinault's and Lully's *Tragédies lyriques*," *Acta Musicologica* 63/1 (January-April 1991): 57-72.

[6] See Buford Norman, “*Proserpine*--Prudent Sexual Politics in a Patriarchal World,” in *Touched by the Graces: The Libretti of Philippe Quinault in the Context of French Classicism* (Birmingham, AL: Summa, 2001), pp. 213-236.

[7] There have been a few focused studies on this particular topic: for example, Georgia Cowart, “Of Women, Sex, and Folly,” cited above; Kay C. Jaffee, “Medea among the Ancients and Moderns: Morality and Magic in French Musical Theatre of the Seventeenth Century” (Ph.D. dissertation, New York University, 2001); and Joellen A. Meglin, “Galanterie and Gloire: Women's Will and the Eighteenth-Century Worldview in *Les Indes galantes*,” in Lynn Matluck Brooks, ed., *Women's Work: Making Dance in Europe before 1800* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2007), pp. 228-256. None of these studies are cited by Ray.

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